

For the Cruel Youth, I Got a Love by [kpk110](#)

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Summary:

The last person Steve expected to show up at his house on a Friday night was Billy Hargrove. But here he was, sitting in front of Steve's now-open door with his head between his knees.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Title is from [Siberian Nights by The Kills](#)

The last person Steve expected to show up at his house on a Friday night was Billy Hargrove. But here he was, sitting in front of Steve's now-open door with his head between his knees. Steve tentatively put one foot out the door, then stopped.

"Billy?" he said quietly.

Billy's head moved to the side ever so slightly. He mumbled something unintelligible.

Steve finally stepped all the way outside to crouch in front of Billy. Part of him wanted to scream and curse, to let Billy know how pissed off he still was that Billy came so close to killing him a couple weeks ago. It'd taken all his self-control not to explode every time they crossed paths in school.

The other part of him, the part that was in the here-and-now, was almost afraid to get this close to Billy. It wasn't that he thought Billy was going to attack him again; there was just something off about this whole situation.

"Billy, look at me," Steve said, a bit more forcefully. "Tell me what you're doing here. Is Max missing?"

Billy was silent and unmoving for a second, then he lifted his head and looked at Steve. His gaze was unfocused, though, as if he wasn't actually seeing Steve. A big bruise was blossoming down the left side of his face.

"No," Billy replied, his voice hoarse and a little slurred. "She's at a friend's for the night. I just- I just didn't have anywhere else to go."

Steve studied Billy's face for a moment, realizing just how resigned he looked. This Billy wasn't a threat to him. Steve sighed before straightening up.

“Can you stand?” he asked.

Billy nodded after a second. It took him a few moments to stand up without falling over, and even then he was still wobbly on his feet. Steve caught him by the elbow.

“Did you drive here drunk?” Steve asked, leaning in just a bit to catch a whiff of alcohol on Billy’s breath.

Billy jerked his elbow out of Steve’s grasp. “Don’t. Please. I don’t want any more fighting.”

Steve bit his tongue and stepped aside, waving Billy inside. The house was quiet- his parents were gone for the next few foreseeable nights- and he kind of appreciated that at this moment. He didn’t want to have to explain the drunk guy showing up at midnight. Steve shut the door and steered Billy to the living room couch.

Billy sat down heavily and put his head in his hands. Steve sat on the edge of the coffee table, waiting for Billy to speak.

When it became clear Billy wasn’t going to say anything, Steve spoke. “Are you going to tell me what happened? Like who you got into a fight with?” He waved at his own face.

“I didn’t fight anyone,” Billy mumbled into his hands before dropping them and leaning back into the couch. He wouldn’t look at Steve. “My dad gets... angry sometimes. And he likes to take it out on me. Happy now?”

Steve gazed at Billy for a long time and then dropped his gaze to the floor. He looked back up when Billy started to talk again.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly, as if he was struggling to get the words out. “About, you know, the whole thing that happened where I almost- when I fought you. I was already angry and upset, and then when I found Max with you and the other boys, I got even more upset. I know I’m never earning any awards for ‘best step-brother,’ but that doesn’t mean that I’ve never cared about Max.”

“Have you apologized to Lucas?”

“No. But I will.”

Steve nodded as he rubbed his hands on his thighs. “Alright. Good. I think we have some extra blankets if you want to stay here for the night. You can crash on the couch.”

Billy’s jaw clenched for a half-second. “Thanks.”

Steve stood up and went to search the hall closet for a blanket. He found two and brought both the Billy along with a pillow. There was no ceremony, just Billy nodding his thanks and then Steve heading up to his room.

Steve rolled onto his bed and wrapped himself up in his covers. He shut his eyes and tried to ignore the gnawing feeling in his gut that felt a lot like nervousness. Billy would be gone by the morning, and then they’d never talk about this night again.

It was dark. Steve blinked over and over again, but nothing in his field of vision changed. He started to crawl forward, the ground beneath his hands giving way to his weight in a strange way. He felt like he should know this place, but his mind wouldn’t quite let him know what it was.

Something wrapped itself around his ankle, tightening like an iron vice, holding him in place no matter how much he tugged at it. Steve felt his chest constricting in panic. He was back in the underground tunnels. But how? He couldn’t remember. He could barely even find it in himself to breath as more and more tentacles wrapped themselves around him. They were shaking him like he was a toy to be played with, like he was nothing.

Steve sat up suddenly, light stinging his eyes. He grabbed onto a tentacle wrapped around his arm and-

“Steve, shit, let go. Nancy’s on the phone for you.”

Steve took a moment to let his eyes adjust to the light. He could feel himself soaked in sweat. Eventually, his own room came into focus. Billy was standing over him, one of his wrists trapped in Steve’s grip,

and the other hand holding out the phone to him. The bruise on the side of his face had darkened overnight.

It had only been a dream. Just a bad dream.

Steve let go of Billy and took the phone from him without a word. Billy gave him an inquiring look, then left the room.

“Nancy?” Steve said, cradling the phone gently, afraid to get too much sweat on it.

“Hey, Steve,” she replied. “Was that Billy that answered your phone?”

“Yeah, he, uh, came over to apologize for, you know, beating me up.” Steve hoped that was an explanation she’d take.

“Oh, I see,” Nancy said. “So, um, I know this is kind of weird for me to call you and I’m sorry for that, but I think I may have left my favorite sweater at your house. Is there any way that I could come pick it up? Or maybe you can just give it to me at school on Monday. It’s the pink one with the kind of flowery design at the bottom.”

Steve rubbed at his face. He still felt a dull ache whenever he saw Nancy, and hearing her talk to him made it worse. “Yeah, I’ll try to find it and bring it to you on Monday.”

“Thanks.” Nancy paused. “I hope we’re not in a totally bad place or anything. Mike and his friends like having you around.”

“Yeah, no. We’re not in a bad place. I, um, I have to go, Nance. I’ll talk to you later.”

There was another pause before Nancy responded. “Okay. Talk to you later.”

Steve heard her hang up. He stayed where he was for a long minute before heaving out a sigh. He slipped out of bed and changed into dry clothes. He headed downstairs, listening for any sign of Billy. Steve hadn’t heard him leave, but he’d been a bit distracted on the phone.

He found Billy in the kitchen, drinking a glass of water. Billy fixed

Steve with a blank look as he set his glass down on the counter.

“Didn’t take you for the kind of guy to have nightmares.” Billy tapped his fingers on the counter briefly. “I saw. Whatever that thing- that beast- was in that kid’s fridge, I mean. Is that what you were dreaming about?”

Steve froze. “I don’t-”

“Don’t play dumb with me, Harrington. I know what I saw.”

“Then why didn’t you confront me about it sooner?”

“I was keeping my distance. Didn’t need my sister cracking my kneecaps.” Billy scrunched his nose as he shot a look at the floor.

Steve sucked in his lower lip, trying to think of what to say. “Just don’t worry about the Demodog, okay? We handled everything.”

“Demodog?’ Seriously?” Billy leaned back on the counter, as if trying to take all of Steve in at once. “You’re batshit crazy, you know that? You can’t just expect me to pretend like I didn’t find a dead monster in a fridge.”

“Can you just trust me on this? I get that we’re far off from being friends, but I’m telling you that it’s best for you if you let this go.” Steve felt like he was two steps away from actually begging. He knew that the more people who knew the truth about what happened in Hawkins, the more dangerous things would become.

“I need you to tell me more than that; I need you to tell me what the fuck is going on in this town.”

“Is that why you came here last night? Because you thought you could harass information out of me in the morning? Or maybe you came here because you don’t-”

“Don’t finish that sentence, Harrington,” Billy snarled. “Whatever jab you want to take at me and my life, I’ll make sure to hit you back twice as hard.”

Steve opened his mouth, then closed it as his brain tried to supply

him with things to say. He inhaled deeply and moved to grab Billy's glass off the counter. He placed it in the dishwasher, then turned to face Billy, who had been watching him with a smug look the entire time.

Steve gripped the counter with one hand. "Why do you *hate* everyone so much? Last night, you actually seemed like you could be a decent person. But I guess it must've just been the alcohol talking."

Billy swallowed hard as the arrogant look on his face slid off. It was replaced by misery, and then, even faster, anger. He shoved away from the counter and stalked to the front door. Steve followed behind him at a distance, watching the rigid line of Billy's back.

Billy flung the door open. He was halfway out the door before he stopped and spun around to face Steve. He pointed an angry finger at Steve, looking like he was ready to yell something obscene. But then he deflated a bit, the fury on his face warring with something like grief.

"I don't want to be like him," Billy whispered fiercely. He turned and walked out the door, leaving Steve standing uselessly in the middle of the room, head reeling at how quickly everything had turned sour.

The sound of Billy's Camaro starting up jarred Steve back into reality. He walked back to the kitchen as the car's roar faded into the distance. He ran a hand through his hair, processing what had happened. Steve could only guess that Billy had been referring to his dad before he walked out the door. It was something that he wished he could ask about.

If anything, Steve would probably end up avoiding Billy as much as he could. It would be difficult with basketball practice, but he'd manage. They hadn't spoken a word to each other since the incident at Will's house- not until last night.

Steve shook his head as he opened the fridge, staring at the few things left in there. Everything was getting too complicated for him, and he wished he could pause time so that he could catch up to it all.

On Monday, when Steve pulled into the school parking lot, he was admittedly relieved when he didn't see Billy standing in his usual spot by his Camaro, smoking a cigarette. Now he only had to worry about Nancy. He'd decided this morning, after tossing his room to find her sweater, that he'd make this encounter as short as possible.

Steve turned off his car and gave his steering wheel a pat. The past few weeks had felt empty without Nancy by his side. She'd always pushed him to be better, to open up, and right now he was wishing he could confide in her about everything that he'd been experiencing. Instead, he had to put on a brave face as he stepped out of his car and scanned the parking lot for Jonathan's car.

He spotted the car a few spaces away, and also spotted Nancy and Jonathan sitting in it. Nancy was laughing at something Jonathan was saying. She looked... happier now than she had in the past few months. Steve wanted to feel resentful towards Jonathan, but honestly he couldn't find it in himself.

Steve pushed his thoughts away and walked over to them. He leaned down to tap on the passenger-side window. Nancy jumped a little, then relaxed when she saw him, and rolled the window down.

"I found your sweater," Steve said. It came out sounding a little lame. He pulled her sweater out of his bag and handed it to her, then stood up straight to leave.

"Steve, wait," Jonathan called out.

Steve crouched back down.

Jonathan continued talking. "Will is having a birthday party next Saturday and he'd like you to come. It'd be in the afternoon. I can get you more details later if you want."

Steve was silent for a moment. "I, um, I think I can make it. Yeah, just let me know the time. Maybe also let me know what Will wants. I don't want to be the fifth person to give him crayons or something."

Jonathan nodded and smiled at him. He seemed relieved that Steve had accepted the invitation. Maybe this was his way of trying to

make thing right with Steve.

“I’ll see you guys later,” Steve said, giving his own small smile. This time no one stopped him from walking away. He let out a sigh as he headed inside the school. That hadn’t been too bad. Maybe he really could be friends with them and have it not be super awkward.

Steve’s thoughts slammed to a halt when he caught sight of Billy shoving a textbook into his locker. Steve could still see the bruises on his face, though they weren’t as prominent as they had been a couple days ago.

Was it supposed to be like this forever? The two of them throwing digs at each other when they had to talk, and then avoiding each other the rest of the time? It didn’t seem like something like that could last.

Billy turned his head and caught Steve’s eye. He sent an unpleasant, shark-like smile Steve’s way. Steve ignored it and kept walking to class. He wouldn’t let Billy get under his skin any more than he already had.

That’s not to say that Steve wasn’t look over his shoulder for the rest of the day, wondering when he’d next see Billy. He managed to stay out of sight, but of course it was unavoidable that they’d be around each other during basketball practice after school.

Steve managed to keep his distance in the locker room, but it was a different story once they were on the court. Billy was an aggressive player, and that aggression got thrown at Steve most of the time. Steve had gotten good at taking it, but today was different. He was in a bad mood by the time their practice was halfway through, and it was only getting worse.

Billy had just body checked Steve to floor, and when Steve got back up he took the opportunity to shove Billy from behind. Billy stumbled forward a few steps, then spun around to shoot Steve a glare.

“What happened to planting your feet, Hargrove?” Steve taunted.

Billy rushed forward and grabbed Steve’s shirt, pulling him close.

“You know what, Harrington? You’re a little shit. Don’t think for a second that I’ll take your bullshit.”

Steve wrenched Billy’s hand free of his shirt, and made his own move to grab Billy. Hearing the word ‘bullshit’ come from Billy’s mouth had only made him madder. Things quickly devolved into a shoving match that was only stopped by Coach forcing his way between them.

“You boys need to cool it,” Coach hissed at them.

“We’re fine,” Steve said. He flicked Billy a cold look.

“No, you’re not. Both of you go sit in the bleachers. Together. Talk it out instead of trying to kill each other.”

“Yes, Coach,” Billy said, flashing a charming smile. “I think we’re both capable of that. Aren’t we, Harrington?”

Steve stared at Billy, not kindly. “Yes. I think so, too.”

“Good,” Coach said, waving them off. “Now go. Get off my court.”

Steve took the lead, stalking off the court and sitting in the middle of the bleachers. Billy sat down next to him without a word, staring out at the court with a shadowed look on his face.

Steve turned to him, ready to get things off his chest. “You want to know why I’m angry?” He didn’t wait for a response. “It’s because of you continuously pulling this kind of shit on me. I get that you have a lot of anger. And I get that you have a crappy dad. Hell, you may even have a crappy step-mom for all I know. But that doesn’t make it okay for you to take things out on someone else.

“What I really want is to be not-enemies with you. We don’t have to be friends or anything close to it. It’d be great if we eventually could, but for now I’d settle with you not making me a target of your aggression. You can’t expect everyone you meet to put up with it. You have to find a new way to get rid of your anger or you’re going to end up self-destructing.” Steve took a moment to catch his breath.

Billy finally looked at Steve. Steve expect him to be furious, but his

face was as resigned as it had been the night he'd shown up at Steve's house. Steve fought down the impulse to look away. "I'm trying, alright?" Billy took a breath and looked down at his hands, obviously straining to get his next words out. "I went to my first therapy session yesterday. I'm supposed to do these exercises to help keep my emotions in check, or something like that. I'm just afraid that my dad is going to find out. He hates the idea of 'getting help from a professional.' Thinks it's weak and whatnot."

Now it was Steve's turn to look down at his hands. He contemplated on what to say. "That's brave of you," he said slowly. "I had no idea you were doing that. Which I guess is the point." The bad mood he'd been in was dissipating quickly.

"Sorry about... everything." Billy's leg had started to bounce up-and-down erratically. "This is who I've been for years and it's going to take some time to change. And I want to change. If I don't, I'm heading down the same path as my dad."

Steve licked his lips. "I'm sorry, too. For egging you on like I did."

"Don't apologize. This is on me."

Steve lifted his head to gaze at Billy, who looked disgruntled. He opened his mouth to speak but Coach interrupted him, calling the two of them back onto the court. Billy immediately stood up and started to make his way down the bleachers. Steve caught up to him, touching his shoulder to get his attention. Billy stopped but didn't turn around, cocking his head to let Steve know he was listening.

"Hey, um," Steve said, "the next time you get drunk and start thinking about driving somewhere, call me instead and I'll pick you up. Got it?"

Billy didn't respond for a moment, still looking out at the court. Then he tugged lightly at the bottom of his shorts and said roughly, "Got it."

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for your support on the first chapter, and I hope you enjoy this next one!

It was dark. Steve blinked rapidly, but nothing came into focus. He could hear a low, gurgling growl all around him. Underneath it was the sound of scratching footsteps. He should know this place. He should know those sounds.

Steve started to crawl forward, feeling the way the ground gave way to his weight. He was so distracted by the sensation that he almost missed it when everything fell deathly silent. They were listening. What was listening? The Demodogs. Steve was in the tunnels, being hunted by them.

Steve froze, barely even breathing. He couldn't hear anything except for his own heartbeat. He stayed like that for what felt like hours, hoping he'd be left alone if he didn't move.

But then the shrieking started. It was everywhere, bouncing off the tunnel walls, as if the Demodogs were screaming at each other. Steve started to scream, too. He couldn't help it; it ripped its way through his throat, leaving him feeling raw.

He scrambled to sit up, his muscles working against him. And there was the light.

Steve blinked against it, heaving in air like it was the last he'd ever breathe. His room came into focus, and he found himself covered in sweat. The phone was ringing downstairs.

Steve got out of bed to reluctantly go grab the phone but his door swung open before he could get to it. His mom was standing in the doorway, looking disheveled and mildly concerned. He saw his dad pass by on his way down the stairs. He hadn't even realized his parents were home.

“Steve, are you okay? We heard you screaming,” his mom said.

“I’m fine,” Steve rushed to say. “It was only a bad dream.”

His mom’s shoulders dropped a miniscule amount. “Okay. Why don’t you go ahead and get dressed, and I’ll start on some breakfast.”

Steve nodded. He waited until his mom closed his door to sit back down on the bed. He was almost too exhausted to force himself to get up again. He grabbed a fistful of sheets and clenched hard enough to turn his knuckles white. He shouldn’t be worrying about supernatural things happening when the gate to the Upside Down was closed.

Steve let go of the sheets and flexed his hand. He stood up and walked to the bathroom to take a quick shower before getting dressed and going downstairs. Both his parents were in the kitchen, his mom standing over the toaster and his dad sitting at the table, talking to someone on the phone.

Steve’s mom gave him a small smile and pushed a plate of toast across the counter for him. “I was thinking that, since your father and I are only here until Sunday, we could go do something fun this afternoon.”

Steve paused with a piece of toast halfway to his mouth. “I actually already have plans. I didn’t know you guys would be home this weekend.”

“You can’t cancel?”

“No, it’s a friend’s birthday party. I promised like a week ago that I would go. Sorry.”

His mom’s mouth fell into a straight line. “That’s fine. Your father and I just thought we’d try to spend a bit more time with you. We’re gone so much, and pretty soon you’ll be going off to college.”

Steve put his toast back on the plate. He didn’t think his dad had come up with the idea to spend more time with him. It was probably all his mom’s idea, but even then Steve wanted to ask her why it took so long for her to want to be around him more.

Instead, Steve said, "I'll only be gone a couple of hours. We can do something tonight, or tomorrow morning."

His mom gave him a tight smile. "Yes. We'll see." In her book, that meant it wasn't going to happen.

Steve could hear his dad wrapping up his conversation on the phone, so he said, "I should go do my homework. I've got a lot to finish up." He turned and walked from the room without waiting for his mom's response. A small part of him wished she'd yell at him to come back and eat breakfast with her and his dad, but of course it didn't happen.

When Steve pulled up to the Byers' house, Billy's car was there. Steve parked next to it, glancing over to see Billy and Max sitting inside, talking about something. Billy looked over and saw Steve, giving him a little nod before stepping out of the car.

Steve got out of his own car, and Max called out a hello to him as she ran up to the house with a wrapped present in hand. He grabbed his own present from the car, then shut the door and looked back over at Billy, who had somehow already lit a cigarette. It hung precariously from in between his lips.

"I'm guessing you're not sticking around for the party," Steve said, walking to stand next to Billy.

Billy chuckled, smoke clouding his face. "No. Not really my scene. I'm here to apologize to Lucas. Max is getting him now." He glanced over at Steve. "Something happen? You're not looking so hot."

Steve tensed up a bit. "No, it's just that my parents are in town for the weekend and... It's weird, you know? They're gone so much that they feel like guests whenever they're in the house. I feel like I have to constantly tiptoe around them until they leave again."

Billy gazed at Steve for so long that Steve started to squirm. He was saved by the sound of the door to the Byers' house opening and closing. Lucas and Max stood outside, waiting.

Billy sighed and threw his cigarette on the ground before stubbing in out with his heel. He gave Steve's shoulder a small push, directing him towards the house. "Go enjoy your party or whatever."

Steve let himself be guided to the house and went inside, leaving Billy behind with Max and Lucas. He didn't have much time to wonder how Billy's apology would go before Dustin spotted him and dragged him into an argument with his friends about whether fighters or barbarians were a better class- or at least that's what he thought was happening.

It was nice hearing them talk about normal nerdy stuff, though, even if it was as lost in the conversation as Eleven looked right now. At the very least, Will deserved to act like a kid for once. Steve caught Nancy's eye as she appeared from the hallway with Jonathan behind her. He smiled softly at her, and, to his relief, she smiled back.

He heard Lucas start yelling outside, and everyone's gaze went to the front door. Mike started to stand up, but Steve held out hand to stop him.

"It's fine," Steve said. "He's just talking to- yelling at- Billy."

"Billy's here?" Dustin asked, incredulous. "Why's he here?"

"He's apologizing to Lucas," Steve replied. "He's not here to hurt anyone."

"And you believe that?" Mike asked, sounding unconvinced.

"Yes, I do. He already apologized to me."

Mike sniffed a bit. "So, what, he's changed?"

Steve let out a small sigh. "No. Yes. Kind of. He's *changing*. Hopefully for the better." He saw Nancy flash a supportive smile at him.

The yelling outside stopped, and a few seconds later Lucas walked back inside with Max. Lucas didn't look as mad as Steve expected, and Max even looked a little relieved. Steve felt everyone in the room relax when they saw it, too. He guessed Lucas just needed the chance to speak his mind.

Lucas and Max sat down together and Lucas said, “So, are we going to open presents or what?”

Dustin let out a whoop, and Will grinned. Steve found himself grinning, too. Jonathan went to get Joyce and Hopper as the kids shoved their presents at Will, who looked bright and happy as he laughed.

“Okay, okay,” Joyce said as she and Hopper and Jonathan joined them. “One at a time, alright? And then we’ll have some cake.” She sat down on the couch behind Will and placed her own present next to him. Joyce beamed down at her Will, a mom happy to have her son back.

Will was smiling the entire time he was ripping open presents, and Steve counted at least three packs of crayons lumped in there among other, nerdy things he didn’t quite get but that the boys were excited about. He exchanged a knowing look with Jonathan before handing over his own present. Will opened it to find the sketchbook and fancy pens that Steve had to drive almost an hour to find. He hadn’t realized how few art supplies this town had.

Will ran his hand across one of the sketchbook’s white pages as Steve said, “I- and by ‘I’, I mean your brother- know that you draw on loose paper a lot, and thought it would be good for you to be able to keep all your drawings in one place.”

“This is awesome,” Will replied, beaming up at him, and Steve sent a thankful look Jonathan’s way. “Thanks, Steve.”

Steve nodded in acknowledgment at him, and Joyce nodded her own thanks to him. The last time he’d been in this house, he’d thought more than once that he was going to die. Now, though, he felt at peace being surrounded by everyone who’d shared that nightmarish experience with him. It sounded weird to be comforted by that, but Steve wasn’t going to question it.

Steve hadn’t been asleep when the phone rang Sunday night. His parents had left right after dinner, and he’d been watching TV ever

since. With the house so quiet, Steve couldn't help the way his heart raced at each little sound he heard outside. He hadn't been able to sleep at all last night, and tonight was looking to turn out the same. It was ridiculous, really, that at his age he was getting afraid to sleep alone in the dark.

Steve unfurled himself on the couch and got up to grab the phone. "Hello?" he said, thinking maybe it was Nancy calling about another sweater he'd have to find.

The other side of the line was quiet for so long, Steve almost hung up. But then he heard a small voice say, "Steve? It's Billy. I, um, I know it's late and I'm not drunk but..."

Steve waited to see if Billy would say more, but he didn't. "Where are you?" he asked.

"I'm at a gas station a couple blocks from my house. It's a mom-and-pop type of place."

Steve glanced at the clock in the kitchen. It was a little past eleven. "I'll be there soon." He heard the line go dead as Billy hung up.

Steve stared at the phone for a second before putting it down and grabbing his keys from one of the hooks by the front door. He hesitated for just a second as he reached to open the door, wondering if maybe, somehow, there were still monsters out in Hawkins. Then he shook his head and went outside. It wasn't like him to be so paranoid. He really needed to get some sleep.

Steve got in his car and turned it on, guessing at what kind of state Billy would be in when he found him. He managed to find the gas station easily, though he'd accidentally driven past it for a few seconds before he registered that it must've been the place. If Billy had been calling him from it, only a few blocks away from the Hargrove house, something bad must've gone down there.

As Steve parked in front of the convenience store behind the pumps, Billy walked outside. The car's headlights made Billy almost look like a ghost as he passed in front of them. Steve caught sight of his face as he got in the car, and it made his heart grind to a stop.

The bruises on Billy's face that had been fading before had been replaced with angry red marks that would begin to bruise soon. His lip had been split and was swelling, and blood was smeared along the side of his chin. And Steve could only hope that his nose wasn't broken.

Billy refused to make eye contact with Steve as he said, "Don't ask about it, okay?" He turned his body towards the passenger-side door, away from Steve.

"Where do you want to go?" Steve asked softly, studying the back of Billy's head, the loose curls of his hair.

"Away from here," Billy replied flatly. "Away from *him*. Just drive. Please."

Steve backed out of the gas station and drove away from it, away from Billy's house. He drove for so long that he wasn't entirely sure he ever had a real destination in mind to begin with. But then he realized where they'd wound up, and his grip on the steering wheel tightened.

He kept driving, up a steep dirt road, hidden from plain view by the trees. But he'd been up here by himself many times before, to the cliff that overlooked Hawkins. Steve pulled up to the edge of the drop-off and stopped the car.

Billy was staring out the front window at the town laid out before them. Hawkins looked empty up here, most of the buildings blending into the darkness. But some places were full of light and, Steve liked to think, full of life.

Billy audibly drew in a deep breath, then exhaled. "Did you bring me to a makeout point?" he said, obviously trying to joke, but Steve could tell his heart wasn't in it.

"No," Steve replied seriously. "I used to come up here a lot last year when I needed to think." He got out of the car and circled to the trunk to fish out his gym bag.

Billy followed him, making barely any sound. "I know this sounds

stupid coming from me right now, but you don't look so great."

Steve finally found a clean towel at the bottom of his bag along with a bottle of water. He wet the towel and handed it to Billy. "I didn't sleep last night."

Billy took the towel and dabbed at his face. He was little more than a gray figure outside of the range of the headlights. "More nightmares? Tell me about them," he said when Steve nodded.

"I can't."

"Why not? Is it about that Demi- Demodog? Whatever the fuck you called it."

Steve nodded again.

"Then tell me about that monster and how you found it, and then you can tell me about your dreams." Billy kept talking even when Steve opened his mouth to respond. "I know that Max has to know about all that stuff, too. And the other kids. They were all in the house where the monster was stored. C'mon, Harrington, I'm a big boy. I think I can handle anything you throw at me."

"I know you can. It's just, I'll sound absolutely insane to you."

Billy paused in cleaning up his face and Steve could tell he was making a disgruntled face at him.

Steve kicked at the ground a couple times. "Fine. I'll tell you. But don't tell anyone else."

Billy nodded and moved to the front of the car to sit on its hood. He patted the space next to him, and Steve moved to occupy it. Steve told him everything he knew, everything he witnessed and experienced. Through it all, Billy didn't take his eyes off him. And even when he was done talking, Billy kept looking at him.

"Shit, man," Billy finally said after a moment of silence between them. "That all sounds like a huge shit-show of weird supernatural crap. I'd have nightmares, too, if I'd been through that."

“Do you get nightmares about your dad?” Steve asked out-of-the-blue, regretting it as soon as it came out of his mouth. He braced himself in case Billy reacted badly to it.

However, Billy just turned his gaze to Hawkins as he pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from his pocket. “Sometimes.” He lit a cigarette and threw the pack and lighter down on the hood. His eyebrows drew down as he spoke again. “You know what I really fucking hate?”

“Wearing shirts?” Steve joked.

Billy flipped him off. “Being stuck here. I could technically leave but then I’d be leaving Max and her mom behind with my dad, and he might start hitting them if I’m not there to be his punching bag.”

Steve couldn’t think of any response. He knew Billy couldn’t take Max with him if he left- there would be too much legal stuff, and Max wasn’t even related to Billy-, and there weren’t many other options outside of that. So Steve just took the cigarette from Billy’s fingers and took a long drag. When he held it out for Billy to take back, Billy was gazing at him appreciatively.

“Didn’t know pretty boy liked to smoke.” Billy reached out to take the cigarette, his fingers grazing the skin of Steve’s wrist and the back of his hand before plucking the cigarette away. Billy stared at the cigarette a moment before sticking it back in his mouth. A weird fire started to burn in the pit of Steve’s stomach as he watched Billy take a drag.

Billy took the cigarette out of his mouth and made a clicking noise with his tongue. “I’ve thought about killing him. My dad.” He paused, searching Steve’s face for something. Maybe he was trying to find shock or disgust, but Steve wouldn’t give it to him. “Everyone thinks he’s such a goody-two-shoes family man, which means the police would never believe me if I claimed he was hitting me. They’d probably think I’d gotten into a fight at school instead. “I’ve planned out his death so many times. Each time, he dies a different way. But always by my hand. I’m sick and tired of waiting like a coward for him to come home each night, not knowing what kind of mood he’ll be in, not knowing if this’ll be the time that he hits a little too hard

and I don't get back up." Billy paused to take a long drag. "I just want him gone."

There wasn't really anything to say to that, so Steve laid back on the hood of the car, staring up at the cloudy night sky while Billy finished his cigarette. Eventually Billy stood up and put the cigarette pack and lighter back in his pocket.

"You can take me home now, Harrington," he said, though Steve thought he heard a hint of dread in the way Billy spoke.

Steve sat up. "You can spend the night at my place."

"Steve-"

"Billy."

Billy shut his mouth at the weight in Steve's voice, his body going tense.

Steve spoke more softly. "I'd rather you not go back there tonight. You can sleep on the couch again."

"Don't tell me Steve Harrington is starting to care about me," Billy replied mockingly, but his voice was wavering just a bit.

Steve blew out a breath as he stood up. "Just get in the car, Hargrove." He heard Billy whisper 'dick' under his breath.

Billy joined him in the car, though, drumming his fingers on his knees the whole drive back to Steve's house. They didn't speak as they went inside, and they didn't speak as Steve handed Billy blankets and a pillow. As Steve laid down in his bed, staring up at the ceiling, he felt a little bit better about ignoring the sounds outside as he fell asleep.

3. Chapter 3

It was dark. Steve started to blink, then realized where he was when nothing came into focus. He wouldn't be able to see anything in the tunnels. He didn't even try to get anywhere this time, just curled up on his side. Maybe nothing bad would happen if he stayed still and silent from the start.

But, of course, the sound of low growling and the subtle scratch of claws against the ground reached his ears. Steve shut his eyes- not that it made any difference- and reminded himself that it was only a dream. He was the one in control here. Right?

The growling and scratching grew closer and closer. The hairs on the back of Steve's neck stood on end when he felt a warm breath on his face, then cold, slimy skin against his own. Fuck it. Steve shoved his arms out into the darkness, hoping to put a little distance between him and the Demodog before trying to get away.

His hands only hit the air, but he was stumbling to his feet a second later anyway. He only made it two steps before pain exploded in his right calf, razor-like teeth tearing through skin and muscle. He screamed as his other leg became a chew toy for a new Demodog. He fell to his knees, his mind going blank. Another Demodog managed to take hold of Steve's left arm and he uselessly attempted wrench free of it. This was too real, too real, too-

Steve punched out with his remaining strength, and he felt a sick sense of victory when his fist connected with something. Light poured in, his one savior. He was flooded with relief when his room came into focus. He was slick with sweat, and he could feel phantom pains where the Demodogs had bit him in the dream.

A short curse caused Steve to look down. Kneeling beside his bed was Billy with his head down, cradling his chin.

"Didn't realize you could hit that hard, Harrington," Billy said as he stood up, looking forcefully unconcerned. Blood covered his chin, spilling out from his lip, which had split open again.

“What...” Steve trailed off, hoping Billy would explain things to him. His chest felt heavier now.

“I heard you screaming,” Billy said, wiping some of the blood off his face, “so I came up here to check it out. Thought you were getting murdered or something. Turns out you were just dreaming. When I tried to wake you up, you punched me in the face.”

“Shit,” Steve said. “Fuck. I didn’t- I’m sorry.” He stood up, one of his legs getting tangled in his sheets in the process. He shook it free, remembering the dream-Demodog’s hold on his leg. His hands were shaking.

“It’s fine,” Billy replied, sending Steve a questioning look. “Just point me to the nearest bathroom.”

“It’s right across the hall.” Steve followed Billy to the bathroom, trying to wipe the sweat off his face with the bottom of his already sweat-soaked shirt.

Billy gave Steve a bewildered look when Steve crammed himself into the bathroom alongside him. “What are you doing?”

“I’m getting the first-aid kit for you,” Steve replied, giving Billy a light push to tell him to move away from the counter’s cabinets.

Billy stepped aside and settled himself on top of the toilet tank, eyeing Steve suspiciously. “Do all your dreams make you violent?”

Steve finally found the first-aid kit and placed it on the counter. He took out a piece of gauze and soaked it in alcohol. His hands were still shaking a bit.

“No,” Steve said. “Only the bad ones. Which seems to be the only kind I’m having lately. Now hold still.”

Billy shied away from the gauze Steve was holding out towards his face. “I can do that shit myself, Steve. I’m not a kid.”

Steve sighed. “I’m trying to be nice and make it up to you for punching you in the face.”

“Doesn’t you punching me make us even now? I fucked up your pretty face once before and now you got to help fuck up mine.”

Steve let his hand drop and stared at Billy wide-eyed, his stomach rolling over itself. “Billy, I didn’t mean to-”

“Shut up,” Billy snapped. Then he looked away from Steve, his voice softening. “I know you didn’t mean to hurt me.”

Steve gently took hold of Billy’s chin and tilted his head back towards him so that he could clean up Billy’s lip. Billy subtly mouthed a few curses as Steve did it, but kept still otherwise. When Steve finished, he threw away the blood-covered gauze.

Steve snuck a look at Billy only to find Billy was already looking at him. Steve swallowed and looked away. Then he remembered that it was a Monday and he had no idea what time it was other than that it was some time in the morning.

“I should, um, probably take you home so you can get ready for school,” Steve said.

Billy hopped off the toilet and gave Steve’s shoulder an awkward pat as he moved past him out of the bathroom. “At least take a shower first. I don’t want to be stuck in a car that smells like the boys’ locker room.”

Steve sniffed his shirt, then crinkled his nose. Yeah, a shower sounded good right now.

Somehow, Billy had managed to make it to school before Steve. His Camaro was already in its usual spot when Steve arrived, though Billy was nowhere in sight. However, as Steve stepped out of his car, he was approached by Max. Lucas trailed behind her, fiddling with a strap on his backpack.

“Hey,” Max said, shifting her skateboard from one hand to the other. “I saw you drop Billy off at the house earlier. He wouldn’t talk to me about it, though.” She tilted her head at Steve, as if urging him to explain why he’d been with Billy.

Steve closed his car door and rested his hip against the hood. “He crashed at my place last night. I didn’t want him going back home after... You know.”

Max nodded once, satisfied with the answer. Steve wondered how much she knew about what went down between Billy and his dad, but he didn’t want to ask her right now.

Steve shifted his attention to Lucas. “Hey, I never asked how Billy’s apology went.”

Lucas shrugged nonchalantly, but there was a bit of anger behind it. “I didn’t forgive him. He could’ve killed you, Steve. And if you hadn’t been there, who knows what he would’ve done to me. Saying ‘sorry’ isn’t going to cut it for me, and Billy should know that now.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Steve said. “I’m not here to get you to forgive him, especially when I haven’t done that yet, either.” He heard the warning bell for first period chime from the open doors of the school. “Now go, get to class before you’re late.”

Max and Lucas both shouted a goodbye to him as they bolted off towards the middle school. Steve stayed where he was for a second longer before forcing himself to high-tail it to class, just barely getting into the classroom by the time the final bell rang.

After school was let out, and Steve was on his way to basketball practice, he ran into Nancy. She was leaning against her locker, looking like she was waiting for someone. Jonathan, probably. Steve was prepared to just say hi to her and then continue on his way to practice, but she caught his arm and pulled him aside.

“Do you have a moment?” Nancy asked.

Steve bit back the impulse to push back the stray chunk of hair falling across her cheek. “Yeah, of course. What’s up?”

“So, I’ve been thinking.”

“That’s always a good sign.”

“Very funny, Steve. So, anyway, one of my friends is throwing a party

at the end of the week, and I thought maybe it would be good for all of us to go.”

“All of us,’ as in you, me, and Jonathan?”

“Yeah.” Nancy grimaced a bit. “I know the Halloween party we went to didn’t go so well. But I won’t be drinking this time. And I think it’ll be a fun way to spend some time together so things are a little less awkward between us. We’ll be surrounded by other people, like at Will’s party, which went pretty well.”

Steve blew out a breath. It was sweet, honestly, that Nancy was making an effort to mend things between them, but on the flipside he wondered if he’d be able to handle being at another party with Nancy. He’d look like a dick if he didn’t at least try to be civil.

“Fine, I’ll go,” Steve said. “But, I reserve the right to leave anytime I want.” He was surprised at how little he ached when Nancy smiled at him brightly.

“Great,” she said. “I’ll call you about it later, okay?”

Steve nodded, and watched her walk away after she gave his arm a quick squeeze. When she had disappeared from sight, he turned and headed towards practice. He felt like he could stand to get pushed around a bit before the day ended.

The far corner of the room was the only unoccupied spot in sight. Steve squeezed through the final throng of people in his way to stake claim to the area. He’d been separated from Nancy and Jonathan about a half-hour after they arrived at the party and he had yet to find them again. He probably needed to find them if he wanted to get back home since Jonathan had been his ride.

Steve was feeling particularly more crowded than he’d ever felt before. He clutched his drink in front of him like a shield. The dim lighting and loud music and yelling and shrieking was forcibly reminding him of his recent nightmares. His chest was starting to painfully contract, his breathing becoming short and shallow. He was

getting more light-headed the more aware he became of the people pressing up against him. This was getting to be too much for him.

Steve decided that enough was enough. This wasn't the kind of person he was, but he needed to get out of this house right now. Steve started to shove people out of his way, heading for the front door. When he got there, a mere few feet from freedom, a wave of people pushed him back further into the house. He briefly locked gazes with Billy- when had Billy gotten here?- a ways across the room when a brief gap opened up in the crowd before promptly being filled up with people once more.

Steve trudged through the crowd again, this time towards the back of the house. On the way there, he caught sight of stairs. He shouldered past people until he got to them, then climbed them as fast as he could. Upstairs, he found a glorious lack of people aside from the few lingering in the hallway.

Steve searched each room, interrupting more than one pair of lovers, until he found a bathroom to lock himself in. He sat down on the floor heavily, propping himself up against the bathtub. His chest felt like it was about to explode from lack of oxygen. Somewhere along the way to the bathroom he'd lost his drink.

Steve didn't know how long he sat there, desperately trying to fill his lungs with air. He was pretty sure he was crying and shaking badly, but it was one of the last things on his mind. He could still hear the music on blast downstairs, along with all the shouting. He felt caged in by noise, a scared kid with nowhere to go.

The bathroom door's handle jiggled as someone tried to open it. Then there was a tentative knock as a familiar voice asked, "Steve? You in there?"

Steve stared up at the door for a second before he choked out an affirmation.

"Open the door, idiot," Billy said, exasperation in his voice.

Steve obeyed, reaching up and turning the lock before slumping back down. Billy opened the door and stepped inside. When he saw Steve

he immediately shut the door and locked it again.

“Jesus,” Billy said, putting his drink down on the bathroom counter. “You look fucking terrible. What’s going on?”

Steve shook his head. He was a slightly afraid of the fact that just seeing Billy made him feel like a little less of a wreck. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on his breathing.

Steve heard Billy sit down next to him. He felt Billy’s hand on his back, patting him lightly.

“What are you doing?” Steve asked, finding his voice.

Billy stopped patting. “Comforting you?” he said uncertainly.

Steve unwittingly smiled in amusement, the knot in his stomach starting to uncoil. He opened his eyes. Billy was sitting with his knees up. Steve pushed on his legs until they went down. He maneuvered in the small space so that he was lying on the floor, curled up on his side with his head on one of Billy’s thighs.

Billy tensed up, taking his hand off of Steve. Steve stared at the baseboard lining the bathroom as Billy slowly relaxed. His lungs still hurt, but he felt like he could breathe better now. Eventually, Billy’s hand found its way to Steve face, wiping away the tears on his cheek and brushing the hair off his forehead. He was gentle, it was frightening. Billy was supposed to be rough and angry, not soft and reassuring.

Steve swallowed. This was getting into new territory. He didn’t know what it was, but he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to know.

“I accept your apology,” Steve said, barely sounding like himself.

Billy’s hand snapped back, as if he’d been burned. “What are talking about?”

“When you showed up at my house a while ago, you apologized for attacking me. This is me saying I forgive you. I didn’t say it then because I wasn’t sure you were completely sincere.”

Billy didn't respond. Steve pushed himself back up so he was sitting. His arms were still a bit shaky, but at least he felt in control again.

Billy wasn't looking at him. He was staring blankly at the floor instead. The bruises on his face were fading to an ugly yellow, and the wound on his lip was still evident.

"Billy?" Steve asked, hesitant.

Billy finally looked at him, his expression unreadable.

"Do you want to get out of here?" Steve rubbed at his wrist.

"Yeah," Billy replied softly, barely loud enough to hear over the music.

"Good. Do you think we can get out through one of the windows?"

Billy blinked. "Excuse me?"

"The windows. Do you think-"

"I heard you the first time. I just don't understand why we can't use the front door."

"I don't want to want to go back downstairs." Steve's chest tightened at the thought. He didn't think he'd be able to explain why that was, even to Billy.

Billy considered him for a moment. "Fine. But if you break an ankle getting down, it's all on you." He stood up and dusted off the back of his jeans.

Steve stood up, too, although a bit weak in the knees. He unlocked the door and slipped out into the hallway. He felt Billy at his back as he went to one of the doors he'd checked on his way to the bathroom.

Inside, he spotted a window, along with a couple fooling around on a bed. Billy shoved past Steve and started to yell at them to get out. They jumped up from the bed, frightened, and scuttled past Steve out the door. Steve shut it behind them.

As Billy fiddled with the latch on the window, Steve tore out a piece of paper from a notebook lying on a small writing desk and scribbled out a quick note. He folded it up and stuffed it into his pocket. He heard a click and turned to see Billy sliding the window up.

Billy gestured towards the open window, the softness from before now gone. "Beauty before brains."

Steve didn't comment, just slipped out the window with practiced ease onto a small ledge overlooking the side of the house. It was dark on this side, though he could hear people at the back of the house. He sat down and let himself slide off the ledge backwards until he was hanging by his fingers. Then he let go and hoped for the best.

Steve landed feet-first onto the grass with a muted thump. He glanced up to see Billy climbing out the window.

"It's safe to land down here," Steve called up.

"Good to know," Billy replied shortly before he jumped down. He landed with a little less grace than Steve had, but recovered quickly. Steve heard the jingle of car keys as Billy fished them out of his pocket. "So, where are we going, princess?"

"This better be you offering to drive me home because you're my only other ticket out of here besides Jonathan and Nancy." Steve followed the sound of Billy's footsteps as he made his way to the front of the house.

Billy made a small noise akin to something like amusement but didn't argue. As they walked through a mass of cars, Steve was thankful to be able to see things again even if he had to look a wreck to the people around him until they reached Billy's car. Steve saw Jonathan's car parked not too far away, so Steve jogged over to it and slipped the note he'd written under one of the windshield wipers. Then he rejoined Billy, who was already in the car and lighting a cigarette.

Steve slipped into the passenger seat. The low thrum of the Camaro as it started up muted the sounds of the party outside. Steve let out a

breath as Billy pulled out onto the street, and his muscles lost some of their tension as the two of them sped along the dark roads. His skin felt too tight still.

By the time they got to Steve's house, Steve could feel the exhaustion sinking in. Billy parked his car but didn't turn it off.

"Have a good night, Steve," he said.

Steve glanced over at him. "Don't do that." He kept talking when Billy started to question him. "You can stay the night here. You don't have to go home."

Billy studied him for a moment, then looked out at the house. Steve got out of the car and walked to the front door. As he unlocked it, he heard the Camaro's engine cut off. Steve pushed open the front door and went to grab the blankets and pillow. When he returned, Billy was sitting on the couch in the living room.

Steve handed the bundle over. "Goodnight, Billy."

Billy gently placed the blankets and pillow on his lap. "Goodnight, Steve," he replied without looking up.

Steve went up to his room and threw on some pajamas before collapsing on the bed. He shut his eyes but, no matter how tired he felt, he couldn't get to sleep. He tossed and turned for over an hour until he decided to give up on sleep. He got up and crept down to the kitchen, not wanting to wake Billy if he was asleep.

Steve filled a glass with tap water, and meant to take it upstairs to drink. When he went back past the living room, he sneaked a peek at Billy over the back of the couch. He was fast asleep. With the help of the moonlight shining into the room, Steve could vaguely make out the rise-and-fall of the blankets along with Billy's breathing. He looked so much younger like this, like he was his actual age.

Steve moved to sit in the armchair facing the couch. He drew his legs up under him and quietly drank his water. He let himself gaze at Billy for a moment, his chest aching with an unnamed emotion.

"It's creepy to stare at people while they're sleeping, Harrington,"

Billy said without opening his eyes.

Steve jumped, spilling water on himself. He cursed and set the glass on the ground. Billy opened his eyes and half sat up, the blankets falling off his shoulders.

“Sorry,” Steve said quietly. “I couldn’t sleep.”

Billy hummed. “Me neither,” he said, though it was clearly a lie if his sleep-slurred voice was anything to go by.

Steve got up. “I’ll leave you alone.”

“Wait,” Billy said with a sigh. He sat up all the way and patted the empty spot next to him on the couch. “Sit. We’ll watch TV until you fall asleep. My mom used to do it with me when I was little. Late night infomercials always work like a charm.”

Steve wavered between leaving and staying. He bit down on his tongue as he turned TV on to a random channel then sat down, Billy’s leg resting against his own. Billy slid half of the blankets over to Steve, who accepted the offer. They were still warm from Billy’s body heat.

They sat in silence for a long time, the TV lighting the room up in changing colors, before Steve asked, “What happened to your mom?”

Billy didn’t immediately answer, and Steve was about to apologize when he said, without glancing away from the TV, “She died a few years back in a car accident.”

Steve took in a slow breath. “I’m sorry.” Even though he didn’t have much of a relationship with his parents, he hated to think of one of them dying out-of-the-blue.

“Not as sorry as I am,” Billy muttered.

“I-”

“Stop talking, Steve.”

Steve shut his mouth. He knew when a conversation was done. After

a moment, he settled back into the couch and focused on the TV, Billy's presence reminding him that change could come at any time.

4. Chapter 4

Steve woke up with a start. He didn't remember falling asleep but it was already light out. He was slumped over sideways, his head propped up on the couch's armrest. A warm, heavy weight was resting on top of him. He shimmied out from underneath it and not-so-gracefully rolled off onto the floor. He looked up to see Billy, still mostly asleep, resettling himself on the couch after Steve had stopped being his pillow.

The TV was still on, playing a commercial for a used car dealership. Steve hoisted himself off the ground and turned the TV off. He heard Billy groan, and turned to watch Billy languidly stretch before sitting up. Billy's hair was a mess but Steve couldn't help but marvel at how good he looked like that.

Steve frowned. That wasn't something he'd normally think about another guy, but Billy wasn't really like any other guy he knew. His thoughts were interrupted when someone started banging on the front door. Billy started to grumble something as he rubbed at his eyes.

Steve went to the door and opened it. His mom pushed past him with an armful of bags without so much as a hello. Steve glanced outside to see his dad walking up to the house, thumbing through a handful of letters.

"I didn't know you were coming back so soon," Steve said, leaving the door ajar as he followed his mom into the living room. He saw Billy standing up, looking more alert, and straightening out his shirt as his mom set her bags down on the armchair.

"You must be Mrs. Harrington," Billy said, putting on his most charming smile and dropping his voice an octave. He extended a hand out to her. Steve wondered how often Billy put on that type of demeanor; he slipped into it so easily.

She took his hand and shook it, flashing a welcoming smile. "Yes. And you are?"

Steve stepped in. “Mom, this is Billy. He’s a friend of mine from school.” He heard the front door close and saw his dad walk past the three of them into the kitchen, focused on reading one of the letters in his hand.

“Steve let me spend the night here,” Billy was saying. “I somehow lost my house key, and my parents are out of town until this afternoon. I can be quite the scatterbrain sometimes.” Honestly, Steve didn’t know whether to be impressed or worried at the effortlessness of Billy’s lie.

“Oh, and what happened to your face?” his mom asked.

Steve caught the subtle bitter change in Billy’s expression.

“It was just an accident,” Billy replied after a miniscule moment of hesitation. “The boys on the basketball team can get a little rough, you know?”

Steve’s mom nodded as if she understood, though he’d never seen her watch basketball or even show up to any of his games. Steve’s attention left their conversation as his dad called out to him from the kitchen. He approached his dad, hoping that he’d just ask Steve to go grab something from the car that’d been left behind.

“I got a letter from your school counselor,” his dad said, worryingly monotone, and Steve immediately tensed up. “Says he talked to you about failing biology *and* you not having started college applications yet. Explain. Now.”

Steve tensed up. “It’s been a couple weeks since I talked to the counselor. I’ve got biology class under control now, dad.”

“And the college applications?”

Steve hesitated long enough for his dad to get the idea. He caught the moment his dad’s face went from carefully blank to agitated.

“So, what? You think I’ve invested in your education up until now so that you can just throw it all away? The way you’re acting tells me that you couldn’t give a rat’s ass about your future- the future that I’ve built for you. Do you think I’ve been teaching you about my

business all these years for no reason? I'll be happy to cut you off now if that's what you want. I've given you the privilege of living off my money up until now; I'd love to see you fending for yourself out there."

His dad moved closer and shoved the counselor's letter into Steve's face. Steve turned his head to the side, feeling the paper crushing up against his skin. If he just stayed still and looked like he was listening, his dad would run through his anger soon enough.

"So, tell me, Steve, what are planning to do with your life?" his dad was saying. "Become the failure this letter is telling me you are? Or," he shoved the letters in his other hand in front of Steve's face so that all he could see was white paper, "are you going to be a real adult and pay bills and have a family and-"

"Stop!"

Steve didn't have to look away from the letters to know it was Billy who'd just shouted that. His dad dropped his hands from Steve's face and threw the letters onto the table behind him. It felt like Steve's heart was in his throat.

"Excuse me?" his dad said to Billy, dangerously even.

Steve glanced over to the living room. Billy shoved past Steve's mom and approached his dad like a predator. Steve stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Do is make you feel like the bigger man to humiliate your son like that?" Billy growled. "You think it's funny or something?"

His dad's mouth was set into a straight line. "What gives you the right to speak to me like that? Didn't anyone ever teach you respect?"

Billy's expression broke for the barest of seconds, something like fear overtaking him. But then it was replaced by anger again. Billy lunged at Steve's dad, and Steve only had a quick moment to process everything that was going on before he stepped in between the two men. He took the brunt of Billy's attack, stumbling back a few steps, but miraculously managed to stay on his feet.

Billy shoved away from him, looking confused. "Move out of the way, Harrington."

Steve stepped forward and gripped Billy's sleeve. "I need you to leave," he said in a low, surprisingly steady voice.

Billy stared at him a moment before clenching his jaw and jerking away from Steve's grip. He stalked to the front door, throwing Steve a betrayed look over his shoulder before he left. Steve watched the door slam shut and took a deep breath.

"I don't want that boy at or near our house ever again," his dad said, barely keeping himself from yelling. "You hear me, Steve?"

Steve kept staring at the door. He could see his mom staring at him out of the corner of his eye. "I hear you."

His dad grunted and said something to Steve about starting his college essays. Steve tore his eyes away from the door. Steve felt his legs carrying him up to his bedroom. He collapsed onto the bed and stared out the window and tried to ignore the empty feeling in his gut.

On Monday, Nancy cornered Steve at his locker before the last class of the day. Jonathan stood behind her, flipping through a notebook. Steve slowly closed his locker, looking past them at the students going by, almost hoping he'd see Billy.

"Hey," Nancy said. "We got the note you left at the party. Some people were saying they saw you leave with Billy."

Steve glanced around at the crowd again. "Yeah. He offered to drive me home." In a way, it was true.

"So, are you two, like, friends now?"

"Um, I don't..." He hadn't even seen Billy since the incident at his house and didn't know how Billy would react to him now. He wasn't even sure how he himself would react. "It's possible."

“It’s possible?” Nancy repeated. “What does that mean?”

Steve licked his lips. “I don’t know. He’s... Billy. I can’t really explain it. It’s hard to get a good read on him.”

“Why don’t you just ask him?” Jonathan said, not looking up from his notebook. “Usually the easiest solution is the best.”

Steve nodded, then realized Jonathan couldn’t see him doing that. “Yeah, you make a good point. Is this what you guys wanted to talk about?”

“Actually,” Nancy said, reaching into her pocket for something, “I came over here to give you this.” She handed him a slip of paper.

Steve glanced down at the numbers scribbled on it. “What’s this?”

“A number. A phone number.” Nancy smiled a bit nervously. “One of my friends wanted me to give it to you so you could call her. Maybe ask her out on a date. She’s cute, I promise.”

Steve was at a loss for words for a second. “Nance, this is... I don’t want this.”

Nancy glanced over her shoulder at Jonathan, who tore his attention away from his notebook long enough to raise his eyebrows at her in an ‘I told you so’ look. She turned back to Steve, a pinched look on her face.

“Is it because I’m the one giving it to you?” she asked.

“No,” Steve responded. He sighed. “Maybe a little. I just don’t know if I want to start dating again yet.” He handed the paper back to her.

Nancy took it from him and crumpled it up before sticking it back in her pocket. “I’m sorry. I thought I could give you the number without it being weird but I was wrong. Just forget this whole thing happened.”

Steve opened his mouth to ask how she could’ve thought it wouldn’t be weird, but Jonathan shot him a look that caused him to close his mouth. Steve nodded instead.

"I should get to class, but I'll talk to you later, okay?" Steve said, hoping to leave the conversation as soon as he could.

"Right," Nancy said. "Okay. We'll see you around." She forced a smile, which Steve weakly mirrored back before they parted ways.

Steve could barely pay attention in class, though. He'd given Nancy a sound reason as to why he didn't want to date someone new, but it hadn't felt like the truth when it had left his mouth. He couldn't shake that thought. It settled in the back of his mind, but he couldn't give any other reason for rejecting the number Nancy had offered him.

Steve tried to ignore the nagging thought as class let out and he headed to practice. Billy pointedly avoided Steve in the locker room but was his usual aggressive self out on the court. Steve welcomed getting knocked down a few times. He'd be a lot more worried if Billy had avoided him on the court as well.

Practice was let out early but Steve lingered in the locker room, not wanting to rush home. His parents had left this morning but, as much as he felt uncomfortable with them around, he also hated to be by himself so much. By the time he walked outside, the parking lot was practically empty. Billy was still there, though, waiting by Steve's car while smoking a cigarette.

Billy barely spared Steve a glance as Steve placed his gym bag on top of the car's roof. Billy took a drag of his cigarette then exhaled slowly. There was no expression on his face, but his posture was full of tension that hadn't been worked off during practice.

Steve felt himself tense up, too. "Are we going to talk about what happened this weekend?"

"What is there to talk about?" Billy looked like he wasn't going to say anything else but then the corners of his mouth twitched down. "It's not okay for your dad to treat you like that. I was only trying to get him to stop."

"You didn't have to try to attack him. He was just being an asshole." Steve knew he was only making an excuse, but he'd been making

excuses like that for years and that habit wasn't going away anytime soon. "What happened to you going to therapy to help with, like, the anger stuff?"

Billy turned to stare out across the roof of Steve's car. "I'm still going." He paused, then spoke quietly. "I just don't always think right when I'm around you." Steve felt his stomach knot up. "What does that mean?"

Billy glanced over at Steve. "Nothing," he said tightly. He pushed away from the car and made to leave but Steve caught him by the arm.

"Billy, stop," Steve said. He watched Billy clench and unclench a fist before facing Steve.

"What?" Billy asked evenly.

"Are we friends?"

Billy's face filled with apprehension and he studied Steve's face for a moment before replying. "I... Yes? Are we?"

Steve swallowed and let go of Billy. "I'd like to think so."

The relief on Billy's face was evident. "I'm sorry," he said after a moment, deflating. "I didn't mean to make you upset. Friends... don't do that."

"I know," Steve replied. "Sometimes things just get out of hand. Let's put this behind us, yeah?" He held a hand out to Billy.

Billy hesitated before taking his hand. Steve pulled him in for a quick hug and Billy tolerated it for a second before pulling away. He looked at Steve strangely before averting his gaze.

"I'll see you around," Billy muttered. He turned and walked to his car without waiting for a reply.

Steve watched him get in the car and speed out of the parking lot, a tight feeling in his chest. He shook it off and threw his gym bag in the trunk of his car before sliding into the driver's seat. He felt like

driving until his car broke down. Instead, he went home and worked on the most mind-numbing homework he had until he fell asleep at his desk.

It was dark. Steve prepared himself for the worst before opening his eyes. Instead of more darkness, he was greeted by the sight of his kitchen. Billy was in front of him, leaning up against the counter, looking like he belonged there.

“Billy?” Steve said. He couldn’t remember how either of them had gotten here.

Billy smirked. He reached out and laid a hand on the side of Steve’s neck, his thumb lightly brushing Steve’s jaw. Steve stopped breathing as Billy leaned forward, lips poised only millimeters from the corner of Steve’s mouth. His stomach felt like it was doing somersaults.

“Tell me what you want, pretty boy,” Billy whispered.

Steve felt the words he wanted to say sticking in his throat. He could hear a distant pounding noise in the background but he couldn’t spare much thought to it. He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to gather himself. He couldn’t reason out why he was letting Billy get so close, couldn’t reason out why he didn’t want to pull away.

Steve opened his eyes and found himself staring at his bedroom wall. He lifted his head from his desk and peeled off a piece of paper stuck to his cheek. His heart felt like it was trying to beat right out of his chest. He jumped when he heard a knocking on the door downstairs.

Steve ran a hand down his face then stood up. He went downstairs and opened the front door, thinking that whoever had been there would be long gone. Instead, he found Billy outside, looking unconcerned with the world, a cigarette hanging from his mouth. Instead of his usual tight-fitting clothes, he was wearing a loose sweater and sweatpants. How he still managed to look good like that, Steve couldn’t fathom.

“Hey there, pretty boy,” Billy said smoothly. “You busy?”

Steve felt a jolt go down his spine. He stuttered a few times before finding his voice. "No, I'm not. Why?" He was starting to wonder if this was another dream. He subtly pinched his leg out of Billy's line of sight but he didn't wake up staring at his bedroom wall again.

Billy took the cigarette from his mouth. "My dad's in a shit mood tonight. I left before things got too bad and I'm not heading back for a while. I wanted to know if you'd come with me to that lookout spot you took me to that one time."

"I..." Steve finally placed what he was feeling, the burning under his skin. Ashamed. What would Billy think if he knew what Steve had dreamt? They had only just admitted to being friends a few hours ago.

"Come on," Billy was saying. "I'll drive. You look like you could use some fresh air, anyway."

Steve hesitated a moment longer. Maybe he'd been spending too much time with Billy. Maybe Nancy was right and he should start dating again. Maybe he was trying to rationalize his stupid thoughts.

Billy's face was beginning to fall, so Steve rushed to say, "Sorry, I just woke up from a nap so I'm still a bit out of it. Buy, yeah, let's go."

Billy nodded, looking mildly relieved.

Steve followed him to the car, sinking back into the seat and absentmindedly directing Billy. The leftover panic from his dream was starting to fade slowly. He couldn't be the only guy to have a weird dream like that, and he wasn't about to let it get to him, not when he and Billy were getting to a good place. Steve glanced over at him.

Billy was tapping out a rhythm on his steering wheel and mouthing the words to a song that was playing in his head. The glare from the streetlights caught on and reflected off of the pendant resting against his chest. He looked nice like that, carefree and young.

Steve looked out the window, watching the street passing below them instead. When they got to the cliff overlooking Hawkins, Steve

stepped out of the car before Billy even had a chance to turn the car off. Steve took a deep breath, relishing in the cool air against his heated skin.

“Steve,” Billy said.

Steve glanced over at Billy, who was getting out of the car. “What’s up?”

Billy shut his door and flicked his burnt-out cigarette onto the ground. “What’s wrong? You’ve been acting off ever since I got to your house.”

Steve perched himself up on the edge of the Camaro’s hood. “It’s nothing. I had a weird dream, is all. Don’t worry about it.”

Billy sat down next to Steve, their shoulders brushing and knees resting against each other. “Tell me about it.”

Steve looked over at him, at his mouth pulling down into a frown. He tore his gaze away and focused on the town below them. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Now or ever?”

Steve swallowed. “Ever, I guess.”

Billy nodded. “Gotcha.” He was a quiet a moment. “Listen, I need you to know that I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. And you can come to me if you’re, you know, ever in trouble, too. Don’t know how much help I’d be, but I can at least try.”

Steve looked at Billy again. This was the Billy that left him feeling shaken up inside: the soft, vulnerable boy who was looking back at Steve like he could be broken with a single word. Steve couldn’t help but stare, wondering how the world could pile so much shit on one person, leaving them scared to open up to anyone at all. But here Billy was, letting Steve in.

“Thanks,” Steve whispered.

“I wish I could offer you more,” Billy replied delicately. There was a

weight behind those words Steve thought he could only be imagining.

“You don’t have to. You’re enough as you are.” It felt like a confession Steve wasn’t yet ready to give.

Billy ran his tongue across his bottom lip. Steve unconsciously followed the movement with his eyes before meeting Billy’s intense, searching gaze. Steve felt like everything inside him was on display and he couldn’t cover up. This was a dream. This was a dream, and he’d wake up any moment now.

Steve barely even had time to grasp what was happening when Billy suddenly leaned in and kissed him.

5. Chapter 5

Steve was frozen in place. Billy's lips were warm and gentle against his own, more cautious than not. Steve didn't know what to do; he'd never been so elated and terrified in his life. He felt the need to kiss back deep in his bones but something in him was screaming not to.

Steve finally found it in himself to move, and he shoved Billy away harshly. Billy fell back against the hood of the car, one of his elbows hitting the metal with a dull clang. He stared up at Steve in blatant surprise and pain. Steve stood up on shaky legs, feeling like his lungs were collapsing in on him. He stumbled away from the car, towards the barely visible break in the line of trees where the dirt path led back down to paved road.

A hand wrapped around his wrist, stopping him in place.

"Steve," Billy said, panic in his voice. "Steve, let's talk about this."

Steve jerked his arm away from Billy; he was panicking, too. "No. No, this is- It's wrong. It's all wrong. I can't- I'm not- I'm not that kind of person." He felt like he was suffocating.

Billy grabbed Steve's arm to keep him from walking off but Steve jerked away from his grip once more.

"Don't touch me," Steve snapped. He started off towards the path again, head down so he wouldn't trip over anything. It was a trivial thing considering what had just happened.

"What are you doing, Steve?" Billy called after him.

"Going home," Steve yelled back, not taking his eyes off the ground in front of him.

Billy cursed loudly behind him. "You can't walk all the way back in the dark. Let me take you home."

Steve just shook his head, though Billy probably couldn't see it, and kept walking. He could feel a headache coming on. All he wanted was to lock himself in his room for a week until he could forget how

good it had been for Billy to kiss him. That sort of thing wasn't supposed to feel right.

A yelp escaped from Steve when something ran into him from behind. He lost his balance and tumbled back against the hood of Billy's car. He'd been so lost in thought he hadn't even heard it or noticed the headlights.

"Fuck," Billy said from the open driver's side window. "Shit. Sorry. I was looking for you but then you just came out of fucking nowhere."

Steve just stared at him, laying halfway across the car. "Seriously? Did you really just run me over?"

"I said you came out of nowhere," Billy retorted. "One second you weren't there, then the next you were. I didn't have time to stop before running into you. But now that we're here, why don't you get in the car so I can take you home?"

Steve stood up straight. "Please, I don't want to talk about anything right now."

"And we don't have to. I won't say a thing to you. I won't even look at you. But I'm not letting you walk home in the dark by yourself." Billy reached over and pushed the passenger side door open. He gazed at Steve expectantly through the windshield.

Steve stood there a moment longer before conceding. He slipped into the car and shut the door. He turned his body away from Billy, staring out the window but not really seeing anything. He heard Billy take a breath, as if he was about to say something, then there was a distinct click as Billy shut his mouth. He started to drive instead.

Steve felt like he was going to throw up. Up until now, he'd only ever been interested in girls. Or at least that was what he'd thought. Then Billy had come along, burning a path into Steve's life, and Steve couldn't help it if maybe he'd fallen a bit head-over-heels for him along the way even after all that had happened between them.

Steve hunkered down in his seat a bit more. He'd heard of guys being with other guys as more than friends. That wasn't something he knew

much about, though. What he'd heard people say about it had made it seem unnatural. So why didn't it feel like it?

Something wet rolled down Steve's cheek, and he belatedly realized he was crying. He almost wanted to laugh. He was meant to be the perfect child, to grow up and go to college and take over his dad's business and have a wife and kids. That dream his dad had instilled in him his whole life was falling apart before his very eyes.

Steve's house finally came into view, and Billy pulled into the driveway without a word. Steve felt like he should say something, anything, but instead he got out of the car and walked up to his front door. He unlocked it and went inside. As he turned around to shut the door, he caught Billy's gaze through the car's windshield. Billy looked as sick as Steve felt.

Billy was the first to look away as he backed out of the driveway and drove off. Steve shut the door and leaned his forehead on it, taking slow, deep breaths. He didn't think he'd be getting any sleep tonight.

Steve dragged himself up to his room and laid down on the floor, needing something sturdy beneath him. He stared up at the ceiling, taking deep breaths. It felt like there was an empty pit where his stomach used to be, carved out by the look of surprise that had been on Billy's face when Steve had pushed him away.

Steve rolled over onto his side and buried his face in the carpet. His whole body ached and his head was pounding. It felt like- It felt like when Nancy had told him she didn't love him. But now that pain was his fault; he'd caused it.

A sob escaped from Steve. He felt stupid. So, so stupid and broken.

"Steve? Steve! It's your turn."

Steve blinked, the room around him coming back into focus. The Wheeler's basement was unusually dim to be playing D&D in, but the boys had insisted it was great mood lighting, as if they were all in the cave their characters were in right now. Mike was staring at him

expectantly from across the table. Lucas, Dustin, and Will looked just as anticipatory.

“Sorry,” Steve said. “I spaced out for a moment.”

“No, duh,” Mike replied. He leaned back in his chair and spread his hands out on the table. “So? There’s just the goblin king left to kill. What are you going to do?”

Steve blew out a breath. “I... am going upstairs to get some water. Don’t die while I’m gone. In real life, not the game.” He stood up from the table, ignoring the boys’ protesting groans, and went up the stairs to the kitchen.

Steve was in the middle of filling a glass with water from the tap when he heard someone clear their throat behind him. He glanced over his shoulder at Dustin.

“What’s up?” Steve asked. “You want some snacks or something?”

Dustin came up to stand beside Steve and raised an eyebrow at him. “You know, good babysitters don’t leave their party in the middle of a fight with an overpowered goblin.”

“You guys have it handled.” Steve took a long drink while Dustin kept talking.

“You’re acting weird. You’re, like, not all there. What’s going on?”

Steve set his glass down and shook his head. “Nothing.”

Dustin scoffed. “C’mon, Steve. Don’t lie to me. Also, everyone downstairs is relying on me to get you back into the game.”

Steve was silent a moment. He’d been distracted by thoughts of Billy the past couple of weeks, ever since Billy had kissed him and Steve had... Well, Steve had had a major freak-out. He’d spent that night lying awake on the floor unable to stop replaying the entire thing in his head.

He and Billy hadn’t talked at all since then. Billy had barely even looked at Steve at school, and he’d started to avoid him on the court

during practice, too. Not that Steve wasn't doing his own version of avoiding and not making any eye contact. He hadn't been able to even consider facing Billy yet.

Steve hadn't felt so miserable in a long time, even after he and Nancy had broken up. His entire body kept up a constant ache the more he thought about how he'd acted towards Billy. He knew he'd have to try to talk to Billy soon if he wanted to work everything out between them. And he really wanted to work things out. It frightened him to realize that he liked Billy so much, and the last thing he wanted was to lose him.

Steve sighed. "Have you ever had a crush on someone you shouldn't?" he asked Dustin.

Dustin eyed him. "Are you still in love with Nancy?"

A laugh escaped from Steve unexpectedly. "What? No. No, I've been over her for a while."

"So, who then?"

"It doesn't matter. It's just a question."

Dustin thought for a moment. "Mm, I don't think so. But let's pretend I have so you can spit out whatever is bothering you."

"I, uh, messed up real bad with this person I really like. And I'm not sure if this person will forgive me for the way I acted."

"And if this person does forgive you?"

Steve rotated the glass around on the counter. "Then we have other obstacles to get through if we want to be together."

Dustin made a face and didn't say anything.

Steve frowned. "Why are you doing that with your face? You look constipated."

Dustin rolled his eyes. "I'm trying to figure out who you're talking about. I haven't seen you hanging out with any girls recently. I've

only seen you with-” His face went through a whole array of emotions in a quick second, then he nodded to himself. “Ah, I think I understand.”

“Understand what?” Steve asked.

Dustin gave him a knowing look. “Billy.”

Steve stumbled over his words for a second. “No. No, no. No, that’s not-”

Dustin reached out and patted Steve’s arm. “You’re really bad at lying, you know that?”

Steve tensed up a bit. He glanced over his shoulder to check if any of the other kids were around. “Do you... find me disgusting or whatever? For liking a guy?”

Dustin frowned. “What? No, man. One of my uncles is gay. I don’t really understand it, and the family doesn’t really talk to him- or about him- anymore, but, I don’t know, I never saw what the big deal was.”

Steve blew out a breath. “That’s... actually kind of nice to hear. Not the whole, you know, family not talking to your uncle part, but you not thinking it’s a big deal. Honestly, I don’t even know how I feel about everything yet.”

“I would say you can talk to me about it, but I know, like, zilch about that kind of stuff. You should definitely talk to Billy, though.”

“Can you keep this a secret just between us?” Steve asked nervously.

Dustin nodded, seeming too wise for his years. “Of course. If you come help us finish our fight downstairs, that is.” He raised an eyebrow at Steve.

Steve huffed out a laugh, feeling himself relax. “Yeah, sure.” He ushered Dustin back towards the basement. “Let’s go kill that troll.”

“Goblin,” Dustin corrected.

Steve resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Same difference."

"Actually, there's quite a few differences."

"I'll take your word for it."

Steve sat at his desk, absentmindedly staring out his window into the dark. He tapped a slow rhythm out on his thigh with the end of a pen. His yet unfinished college essays were splayed out in front of him, and every time he looked down at them he felt a prick of panic in his gut. He couldn't help but wonder if he truly wanted the life his parents wanted for him.

Would he still be doubting himself if Billy hadn't come along and disrupted his life? Steve threw the pen down on the desk and watched it roll across the surface before falling off the side. He'd pick it up later. His talk with Dustin had helped to calm his nerves a bit, but he still felt lost, like his life was out-of-control.

It was always Billy that kept popping up in his mind when he let his thoughts wander. When had Steve started to become attracted to him? He couldn't place his finger on a single exact moment where he truly knew. He didn't even know if there'd been other guys over the years that he'd been attracted to but just wasn't aware of it.

Steve threw his head back and let out a long sigh. He had to call Billy, even if just to apologize for being a jerk about everything. Steve stared out the window a moment longer before standing up and going downstairs to grab the phone. Then he remembered that he didn't actually know Billy's number; he'd never given it to Steve.

Steve placed the phone back down. He'd have to wait until school on Monday to try to talk to Billy. If Billy would even spare him a glance. He was halfway up the stairs when the phone started to ring. He stumbled to a halt then went back down and answered the phone.

"Hello?" Steve said.

There was a small silence on the other side of the line, then a voice said. "Steve? It's Billy."

Steve had to take a breath before responding. "Billy, what... What's up?" He cringed at how lame that sounded.

Billy cleared his throat. "Do you think you could maybe pick me up from the police station?"

Steve stumbled around his words for a second, thrown off-guard. "What are you doing there?"

"I, um, I'd rather tell you in person. If you pick me up, I guess. It's just been a long night, and I don't... I didn't know who else I could call."

Steve shut his eyes then opened them again. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

Billy's voice was quiet when he said, "Thanks, Steve."

Steve hung up and grabbed his keys from their station by the front door. His hands were shaking by the time he started up his car. It had taken him three tries to get the key into the ignition. He took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves, but worry still gnawed at him on the drive to the police station.

When Steve pulled into the parking lot, Billy was already outside, leaning up against the building's wall. Steve started to get out of the car, but Billy walked over to the passenger side and slid in without a word. Steve sat back down and shut the door.

Billy's face was pale in the light coming out of the police building. There was a patch of light bruises traveling along one of his arms. Steve held his breath, waiting for Billy to say something, to even look at him.

Eventually, Billy seemed to come to, as if just now realizing that he was in Steve's car. He glanced over at Steve, then looked down at his own lap. Steve watched his jaw working before he finally spoke.

"My dad is dead," Billy said, devoid of any emotion.

Steve froze. "Did you...?"

“Did I kill him? No.” A look of scorn crossed Billy’s face, but it wasn’t directed at Steve. “They’re saying he went into cardiac arrest. It all happened so fast. One second he was standing there screaming at me, and the next he was on the floor dying. He was dead by the time the paramedics got him to the hospital.”

“Why were you taken in?”

“I was the only other person at the house when it happened. Apparently, the situation seemed suspicious, so the police pulled me in for questioning until the hospital called to let them know what had happened.”

Steve leaned back into his seat, not knowing the right thing to say. “Jesus, Billy. What about Max and her mom?”

“I guess someone called Susan to tell her what happened. One of the police told me she was going with Max to stay at a friend’s house.”

Steve was quiet for a while as he stared at the dashboard in between them. “Hey, um, I know it’s not a great time to bring it up, but I wanted to apologize for being a jerk to you when-”

Billy shook his head, interrupting Steve. “Can we please just forget about that?” He looked over at Steve pleadingly when he didn’t immediately respond. “Steve, please.”

Steve took a moment longer to reply, working up his courage. “I don’t want to forget about it.” Billy started to protest but Steve kept talking over him. “I really like you, Billy. More than I’ve ever liked any other guy- or girl- I’ve known. And I’m fucking terrified by that and I’m fucking terrified that people are going to find out that I’m not... normal and hate me, but deep down I want you. I want to be with you.”

Billy stared openly at Steve, eyes wide in the dim light reaching out from the police building. He reached over and squeezed Steve’s hand briefly after checking that no one was outside to see them. “Steve, you’ve fought fucking monsters from hell, basically. I fully believe you could defend yourself against some bigoted shithheads if anyone were to find out that you were into guys. And if not, I’ll beat them up

for you.”

Steve fought against a smile, but lost. He felt his stomach clench when Billy smiled back shakily. A couple tears ran down Billy's cheeks, but then he started to laugh, low and amused.

“Fuck Neil,” Billy said, wiping the tears away. “I don't even know if Susan will want to keep me around now that he's gone, but there's so much I won't have to worry about anymore. I'm just... glad you're here, Steve.”

“So,” Steve said. “Want to get away from here?”

Billy let out a sigh and sunk down into his seat. “Yes.”

Steve nodded and pulled out of the parking lot, heading towards his house. “Are you sure you're going to be okay?”

Billy let out a sigh. “I think so. I'm still a bit shocked. I guess I kind of believed my dad would live forever.”

Steve glanced over at Billy but didn't say anything. They drove the rest of the way in silence, and went into Steve's house in silence. But when Billy started to head for the couch, Steve caught him by the elbow.

“You can sleep in my bed. With me. If you want.” Steve felt his face heat up as he said the words.

Billy took a slow, uneven breath before responding. “I'd like that.”

Steve led Billy up to his room, and they laid down side-by-side on the bed, Billy letting out a long sigh. Steve was hyper-aware of Billy beside him, could feel the warmth radiating off of him. He didn't know what to say, or if he should say anything at all. As if sensing Steve's apprehension, Billy turned onto his side, facing Steve, and Steve met his gaze.

“I know you can't really be normal with everything you've seen and done,” Billy said, “but for what it's worth, you're pretty normal to me.”

Steve laughed, but he felt a huge weight lift with those words. "I'm only normal to you?"

Billy grinned at him. "You're also pretty amazing. And pretty in general."

Steve took one of Billy's hands and interlocked their fingers. "I think you're amazing and pretty, too."

Billy huffed out a laugh and buried his face in a pillow, his eyes closed. Steve stared at him for a while longer before closing his own eyes, rubbing his thumb absentmindedly along Billy's skin. There was a lot to sort through in both of their lives, but it could wait until the morning.

6. Chapter 6

It was dark. Steve blinked against the black expanse in front of him. Nothing. He must've been in the tunnels again. He mentally sighed, sitting as still as he could. Hopefully, this dream would be over soon.

Steve froze when lights started to flicker on around him. It was a slow process, but eventually it was bright enough for him to make out the Hawkins basketball court. He could hear the measured, methodical sound of a basketball bouncing off the ground over and over again, but couldn't tell where it was coming from.

Steve's first thought was Billy, though he didn't know why; he couldn't see anyone in the room. He was used to being here with other people, to listening to Billy taunt him jokingly. He unfolded his legs and stood up. He scuffed one shoe against the floor and was greeted with the familiar sharp squeaking sound he'd grown accustomed to during practice and games.

It was as if the person handling the basketball had suddenly let it go free, the time between bounces getting shorter and shorter until the sound finally ended. Steve glanced at the entrance to the gym and saw a basketball roll into the room out of the slightly ajar door. He watched as it lazily made its way over to the bleachers before rebounding off the bottom step and eventually coming to a stop back in front of the door.

The desire to not move an inch gripped Steve as he stared at the ball. But then his legs started to carry him over to it anyway. When he reached the entrance, he peeked through the gap in the open door. It was pitch black outside the gym.

Steve tentatively reached a hand out into the darkness but he wasn't met with any resistance. He'd started to draw his hand back, not sure what he expected to find, when something reached out and grabbed him. Steve looked on in mute horror at the long, clawed hand wrapped around his wrist, flashes of the Demogorgon coming back to him suddenly and severely.

Steve opened his mouth to scream, but it was too late. He was

already being dragged into the darkness, the light from the gym quickly fading away. And then-

Steve woke up with a start. He felt paralyzed as he stared up at the ceiling, sweaty and shaky. Eventually, he calmed down enough to sit up. He almost jumped when he spotted a figure in the room with him. Then he realized it was only Billy, sitting on top of Steve's desk in the early morning light, facing the window, doodling absentmindedly on a yellow post-it note stuck to his thigh.

Steve slid out of bed and cleared his throat as he approached Billy. Billy faltered to a stop in his drawing. He glanced over his shoulder at Steve as he ripped the paper off his jeans and crumpled it up in his hand. Billy's eyes were red-rimmed, as if he'd been crying recently.

"Hey," Steve said, perching himself up on the edge of the desk. He grabbed Billy's hand and gently unfurled it so he could take the post-it. He spread it out as flat as he could with his still-trembling hands, revealing a small drawing of a woman's face.

"My mom," Billy said, not looking at Steve. "Or at least what I can do from memory. My dad didn't keep a lot of pictures of her." He glanced over at Steve once. "You look terrible. What's wrong?"

Steve hummed in mock amusement and wiped at his face with his sleeve, trying to get rid of some of the sweat on it. "I just had a bad dream." He refolded the piece of paper as neatly as he could and handed it back to Billy. "Were you crying because you miss her?"

Billy scoffed in denial, but his shoulders were tense. He was quiet for a moment before he seemed to deflate a bit and said, "Yeah. I don't really have any family left now. And it sucks. But, hey, at least I'm eighteen now, so it's not like I'll get put into the foster system."

Steve's brow furrowed. "I thought you were seventeen."

"Turned eighteen a few weeks ago."

"You had a birthday and I didn't know?"

Billy raised an eyebrow at Steve. "Nobody knew. I don't like celebrating my birthday, anyway."

“Can I at least get you a present?”

Billy stared at Steve evenly, then reached out and pushed Steve’s hair out of his face. “You’re too nice for your own good.” He made a face and wiped his hand on the shoulder of Steve’s shirt. “Man, you really do sweat a lot. Maybe I deserve a present just for putting up with all your excess liquid.”

Steve laughed and pushed Billy’s hand away. “Gross. But I probably should take a shower.”

“Please do. For both your sake and mine.” Billy’s face softened. “Mind if I make breakfast?”

Steve stood up as Billy twisted around on the desk and hopped off. “Please do.”

Billy crowded him for a second, as if he was going to kiss Steve, then seemed to doubt himself and pulled away. Steve hesitated as he wondered if he had it in him to kiss Billy just yet, but Billy had already left the room before Steve came to a conclusion. He sighed and went across the hall to the bathroom to take a shower.

After he got out and got dressed, foregoing drying his hair, he went downstairs. He walked into the kitchen, following the sweet scent in the air. He sat down quietly at the table and watched Billy pull a waffle out of a waffle iron, cursing a bit when he burned his fingers.

“When you said you wanted to make breakfast,” Steve said, making Billy turn around to face him, “I thought you were going to pour a bowl of cereal.”

“Listen, Harrington, I don’t mess around when it comes to the most important meal of the day.” Billy turned back around and grabbed the two plates on the counter to take to the table.

Steve got up to grab butter and syrup, eyeing the mess Billy had left while cooking. He actually felt happy to see it, to see a sign of someone else in the house with him. Steve set the butter and syrup down on the table. “Hey, Billy?”

Billy stopped in the middle of sitting down. He stood up straight,

looking at Steve cautiously. Steve bit the inside of his cheek and took a step closer to Billy, his heart beating hard. Billy tensed up but didn't move away. He let Steve lay a hand on his neck, and Steve could feel Billy's frantic pulse beneath his fingers.

Steve leaned in, stopping with his lips a mere inch from Billy's. Billy closed the gap between them, kissing Steve gently. Steve deepened the kiss, his free hand going to grip the other side of Billy's neck as Billy tangled his hands in Steve's wet hair. When they pulled away, they looked at each other for a long moment before they both burst out laughing.

"I'm not sure whose morning breath is worse," Steve said.

"Yeah, we really didn't think that through, did we?" Billy replied, his cheeks turning a light pink.

"Wanna do it again?" Steve joked, and Billy playfully pushed him away.

"We're going to eat so my food doesn't go to waste," Billy said, sitting down with a small smile.

Steve followed suit and slathered his waffle in butter and syrup before starting to eat. His heart refused to slow down, and his whole body felt warm. Kissing Billy was exciting, but still terrifying; he didn't know if this was something that they both wanted to last. When they were both finished eating, Steve pushed his plate away from him.

"So, um," Steve said, getting Billy's attention, "should we, I don't know, talk about us? You know, like, what we are?"

Billy's tongue flicked out from between his lips momentarily. "More than friends? We've had a lot of rough patches between us, and I don't want to rush things. I really like you and I don't want to mess anything up."

Steve nodded slowly, feeling a bit relieved by Billy's answer. It seemed like they both wanted things to last. "More than friends. For now." He intertwined his hands in his lap. "This is all really new to

me. I don't want to mess anything up, either."

"It'll be difficult," Billy said, a pained look in his eyes. "We can't be open about our relationship. If anyone finds out about us..."

"I know." Steve paused. "There is someone who already kind of knows about us, though."

Alarm crossed Billy's face. "Who?"

"Dustin. But he promised me he wouldn't tell anyone, and I trust him to keep his word."

Billy didn't seem fully convinced, but he nodded anyway.

"Have you been with other guys before?" Steve blurted out, unable to stop himself and aware that Billy may not answer him.

But Billy did answer him. "Yeah, a guy I met in California. It didn't last long, though. His parents found out and sent him away. I don't even know where he was sent." He rubbed at the side of his face. "I won't make the same stupid mistakes I made then, not with you."

Steve clenched his hands together tighter. "I'm so sorry, Billy. Neither of you deserved to have that happen."

"Don't apologize," Billy said, forcing his features into neutrality. "Shit happens, and you don't always have control over it."

Steve took a slow breath. He couldn't disagree with that, so he just gathered up their plates and took them to the sink to rinse off. Steve heard Billy's chair scrape against the floor as he put everything in the dishwasher. Billy put the rest of the stuff up and wiped things down before leaning on the counter next to Steve, regarding him for a long moment.

"I should probably go home," Billy finally said, slowly, like it was the last thing he wanted to do. "Susan and Max might be back."

"Okay," Steve responded. "I'll drive you."

Billy took hold of Steve's collar and gave him a little shake before

pulling him in and giving him a quick, clumsy hug. Billy stepped back after letting go.

“You’re a good person,” Billy said.

Steve swallowed hard. He didn’t feel like a good person after everything he’d done in his life, but Billy was so sincere that Steve couldn’t put that thought into words. He gave Billy a small smile instead and headed towards the door. As he grabbed his keys, he started to wish that he could ask Billy to live with him here at his house, especially if Susan wound up not wanting him around. But then Steve remembered his dad telling him to keep Billy away from the house and he squashed that wish down. He just hoped Susan was a kind person.

Not long after, when Steve had parked in the Hargrove’s driveway—could it still be considered the Hargrove’s?—he twisted in his seat to face Billy. “Call me if... Well, just call me for whatever reason you want.”

Billy shot him an amused look. “You got it, pretty boy.” He seemed to want to reach out and touch Steve but didn’t risk it. “I’ll see you around.” He got out of the car before Steve could respond, disappearing inside the house.

Steve blew out a long breath before backing out of the driveway and heading home.

The sun was shining brightly, temporarily blinding Steve as he stepped outside after basketball practice. Billy was still inside getting dressed, so Steve walked over to the Camaro and sat down on the hood, basking in the warm weather. Eventually he spotted Billy walking outside by himself. Most of the students had already gone home by now, and Steve was thankful for some relative privacy. He and Billy hadn’t had much of a chance to talk since he had dropped Billy off at his house; they’d really only exchanged small greetings before class and short retorts on the court.

Steve smiled nervously as Billy approached him. Billy stopped in

front of Steve and raised an eyebrow at him.

“Hey,” Steve said. “I got something for you. As a birthday present, I guess. But also just because.” He reached into his gym bag and pulled out a small, wrapped box and handed it to Billy.

Billy hesitated a moment before taking it. He tore off the wrapping paper and stuffed it into Steve’s shirt pocket before opening the box. He stared down into it for a moment, then cast Steve a questioning look.

“It’s a spare key. To my house.” Steve rubbed his thighs. He’d made the decision to give it to Billy last night; it was a risk in terms of his dad finding out, but he was willing to take it now. “Just, you know, just in case. I know your dad’s not a problem anymore and Susan wants you to stay with her and Max, but... I don’t know. This way, if you ever need or want a different place to stay, you can just come over. Maybe this was a stupid idea.”

Billy was shaking his head. “No. Steve, this is- This means a lot to me. Thank you.” He sat down next to Steve but kept space between them. He stared down at the key for a second longer, then focused back on Steve. “Are you doing okay?”

Steve was caught off-guard. “Me? What do you mean?”

“You’re still having nightmares. And you were probably under a lot of stress these past few weeks. I know I was.” Billy rummaged around in his own gym bag before pulling out a cigarette and lighter. He handed both to Steve.

Steve accepted the offering, lighting the cigarette and taking a long drag before speaking. “I guess things have been pretty crazy lately.” He handed the cigarette back over to Billy. “But it hasn’t been anything I couldn’t work out. As you know.”

Billy huffed out a laugh, sending a plume of smoke out into the air. Then he sent Steve a searching look. “Seriously, though, the nightmares-”

“I can handle them,” Steve interrupted, a little too hastily.

Billy wasn't swayed. "You've never actually told me about any of them. It might help to talk about them. Even if it's not with me."

Steve considered it. "Fine. Yeah. I guess I can find someone to talk to." He stopped speaking when he heard someone call his name.

Both Steve and Billy turned toward the voice and saw Jonathan walking towards them from the school. Steve took the wrapping out of his pocket and threw it into Billy's bag. He hopped off the hood of the car and met Jonathan halfway while Billy stayed behind.

"So," Jonathan started, "apparently I'm Nancy's messenger since she doesn't want to embarrass herself again after trying to give you that girl's number. She wanted me to ask if you and Billy want to go get something to eat with us."

Steve glanced over Jonathan's shoulder and caught sight of Nancy sitting on one of the benches near the school. She gave a little wave. Steve waved back, then glanced back over his own shoulder at Billy. Billy flipped him off before going back to his cigarette.

Steve turned back to Jonathan. "Sure. No promises that Billy will join, though."

Jonathan nodded. "Fair enough. We're going to the diner down the street. Meet you there?"

"Sounds good." Steve paused then said, before, Jonathan could get too far away, "Hey, do you think I could maybe talk to Will sometime?"

Jonathan shot him a confused look. "I guess so. What for?"

Steve tried his best to shrug nonchalantly. "I just had some questions I wanted to ask."

"About the Upside Down," Jonathan said knowingly. "I haven't really asked him about it since everything went down, but I think he'd be happy to have someone to talk to. It's kind of a taboo subject in our house and I know it gets to him."

"I think it's gotten to all of us in one way or another."

Jonathan nodded slowly, frowning, but didn't say anything. He didn't have to. They regarded each other silently for a second before finally going their own ways. Steve walked back over to Billy and smiled innocently at him.

"What did you do?" Billy immediately asked.

Steve let out a small hum. "We're going on a double date. Except technically it's really a single date and we have to act like the third and fourth wheels."

Billy looked over in the direction of Jonathan and Nancy, who were heading to Jonathan's car. "Do I have to go?"

"No. But you'd be a good more-than-friend if you didn't make me have to go alone." Steve playfully kicked Billy's foot.

Billy reached out and caught one of Steve's wrist, running a thumb over the veins visible underneath Steve's skin. Then he let go just as quickly. "I'll go if you agree to talk to someone about your dreams."

"I've already got it covered."

Billy raised an eyebrow at him.

"Will. The kid that got possessed?"

Billy tilted his chin up in recognition. "Good. Maybe. That's a little weird. But let's go sit through what's bound to be an awkward meal."

Steve gave him a cheesy smile. "That you're driving us to, right?"

Billy gently placed Steve's present in his gym bag before standing up. He showed his keys to Steve and gestured to the car. Steve's smiled turned victorious as he got in the Camaro with Billy and directed them to the diner.

Nancy and Jonathan had gotten there before them and had secured a booth near the back of the diner. Jonathan's arm was around Nancy's shoulders, and Steve was honestly happy to see that they were comfortable with one another. Nancy deserved to have someone who would treat her right.

Steve and Billy slid into the other side of the booth, keeping their distance from each other. Maybe Steve was actually feeling a little jealous that they couldn't be public about their relationship, even if it was still in its beginning stages. He exchanged a quick glance with Billy, who gave him a sad smile, like he was thinking the same thing.

After they had all ordered their food, Nancy spoke to Steve. "I'm glad you agreed to come. We haven't really seen each other in a while, and I wanted to catch up. And maybe get to know Billy a bit better."

Billy glanced up at her at the mention of his name, letting the napkin he'd been tearing to strips fall to the table.

"Mike says you and Steve are pretty good friends now," Nancy said, trying to prompt Billy to elaborate. Steve assumed that Dustin had been the one to pass that information to Mike.

"Uh, yeah," Billy replied. "We've been hanging out some."

Steve bit back a grin. "We had more in common than we first thought."

Billy hummed, and Steve caught the note of amusement in it. "What he said."

They all fell quiet as the waitress dropped their food off. Then Jonathan leaned forward a bit and said to Billy, "I've been trying to find some new bands to get into. Do you think you could recommend some to me?"

Billy's face lit up at the question. "Yeah, of course." Before Steve knew it, they were deep in conversation with one another, throwing out names he'd never heard.

Steve met Nancy's eye, and they were silent a moment before they both broke out into smiles. Nancy shook her head, chuckling.

"I could never get into any of Jonathan's music," Nancy said. "I'm glad he's found someone to talk to about it." She glanced over at Jonathan and Billy, but neither were aware they were being discussed.

"I think they're actually talking in a foreign language," Steve said, taking a bite of his burger.

Nancy smiled at Steve sweetly and reached across the table to lay her hand on top of Steve's. "How are you holding up?"

Steve flipped his hand over and gave Nancy's a squeeze. "I'm good. It was tough after all the monsters and fighting and possession and everything else I still don't quite understand, but things have gotten better. And you?"

"It's been about the same for me. Mike was super shaken up for a while, since he had to see all the stuff Will went through. That was probably the hardest thing for me, to see him struggling like that. Sometimes he still wakes up screaming in the middle of the night."

Steve could feel Billy looking at him out of the corner of his eye, tuning back into their conversation. "Yeah," Steve said. "I can get that."

Jonathan cleared his throat to get their attention. "Hey, um, I have an idea. Why don't we and the kids get together one night and hang out? We could play some board games or watch movies or something."

"That sounds like a great idea," Nancy responded. "As long as there's lots of junk food."

"It sounds like a night of babysitting," Billy said, waving a fry at her. "You guys have fun with that."

Nancy snatched the fry away from him and ate it. "You're coming, too. There's no getting out of it. You already know the big Hawkins secret, which means you're part of our in-club now."

Steve watched the two of them have a quiet stare-down. He almost intercepted when Billy suddenly leaned back and crossed his arms.

"Fine," Billy said. "But you should probably warn that Sinclair kid. I'm pretty sure he still hates me."

Steve tried not to laugh as Nancy smiled triumphantly. "It's a plan,

then,” Steve said. “I can only think of a hundred things that could go wrong.”

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

I just want to quickly say thank you to everyone who's been reading this fic. I really appreciate it, and I hope you enjoy this final chapter. :)

Steve gazed at the mass of game boxes before him. The floor was cluttered by boards, game pieces, and fake money (the majority of which had wound up there after Eleven had thrown it into the air, following Mike's lead when he'd quit in the middle of Monopoly). The kids were already breaking out a new game while Nancy and Jonathan mulled over the instructions. He grimaced at the mess. Joyce wouldn't be happy to come back to her house looking like this.

It had been over a week since he'd gone to the diner with Billy, Nancy, and Jonathan. Billy had agreed to come, but he and Max hadn't shown up yet. Steve hadn't had much of a chance to see Billy lately, but they'd managed to steal a few moments together when night came around. The past few days had been fairly hectic, though, with finals coming up in two weeks.

And there was the fact that Steve was starting to go insane thinking about what he was going to do after graduation. He'd sent in a few applications, but there was no telling where his life was headed until he heard back from the colleges. Even then, the future seemed so far out of Steve's grasp.

Steve was starting to feel a bit dizzy from thinking about it all. He moved to the slightly quieter kitchen and sat down at the table, taking some time to breath. He was surprised when Will came in and joined him a moment later.

"Shouldn't you be out there having fun?" Steve asked, folding his arms on top of the table.

Will shrugged. "I'm just taking a break. Like you."

Steve nodded. "Fair enough." He paused. "How are you holding up?"

Will shrugged again, but he didn't seem off-put by Steve's question.

"Having bad dreams?"

"Yeah. You?" Will said, looking up at Steve with expectant eyes.

"Yeah," Steve replied. "I get them pretty often. It's been tough, hasn't it? Especially for you, I'd guess."

Will seemed to think about it. "For a while, it was. But it feels like that big shadow monster- the Mind Flayer- is gone for now. With Eleven here to help us if things get bad again, it makes me feel better. Safer. Plus, I know that my mom and brother and everyone else is here to help, too. My dreams get pretty terrifying, but it helps to know that I'm not in this alone."

Steve couldn't help but be amazed at how old Will seemed in that moment, and how better he felt knowing he wasn't the only one dealing with the aftermath of everything. "You're a strong kid, you know that?"

Will smiled. "It's because I drink my milk."

Steve laughed and grabbed one of Will's arms, holding it up. "You've got those strong bones."

Will laughed, too, attempting to flex. They both hesitated when they heard the rest of the group go silent in the other room. Steve stood up and was about to check on them when he heard Max's voice. The other kids started to talk again, filling the house with noise once more.

Billy appeared in the kitchen doorway a moment later, carrying a foil-wrapped plate. Something seemed different about him, and Steve was about to ask what it was when he spotted the key he'd given Billy hanging on a slim chain around his neck, along with the other pendant he always wore. The words in Steve's throat died, and all he could do was stare.

Billy followed Steve's gaze and self-consciously covered the key with his hand. He placed the plate down on the table and cleared his throat. He looked awkward and out-of-place, but Steve didn't blame

him.

“Will,” Steve managed to say, “this is Billy. I don’t think you two have met before.”

Will shook his head.

“Um, well,” Steve said, trying to find some common ground, “Billy likes to draw, like you do. He’s really good. Maybe he’d like to see some of your drawings.”

Billy raised his eyebrows at Steve. “You’ve seen me draw once, Harrington.”

Steve raised his eyebrows back at him. “But you’d still like to see Will’s drawings, right?”

Billy licked his lips, then relented. “Yes, I’d love to.”

Steve gave Billy a subtle smile before he left the room with Will, and Billy gave him a long-suffering look. Steve went to rejoin everyone else, ignoring the look. Max threw an arm out in Steve’s direction when she saw him.

“Steve,” she said, gesturing at the circle of kids around her, “please tell these idiots that Billy didn’t poison the cookies he brought.”

Steve glanced back at the kitchen, to where the plate was sitting on the table. He turned back to Max. “He made cookies?”

“Yes. I wanted him to. As a peace offering, of sorts.”

“But do we really trust him?” Lucas asked, fiddling with a game piece.

“I do,” Steve said, ignoring the meaningful glance Dustin sent his way. “He’s really trying to be better.”

Lucas shrugged. “That’s what Max says.” He deflated a bit. “I guess we can give him a chance.”

Dustin stood up and went to the kitchen, where he took the foil of the

plate Billy had brought. He grabbed two cookies and came back to hand one to Steve.

“We’re going to eat these,” Dustin said. “And if we don’t die, then we give Billy a chance. Deal?” He waited for everyone to agree before taking a bite of the cookie.

Steve stifled back a sigh as he took his own bite. “See?” he said after he’d swallowed the piece. “Not poisoned, and it tastes delicious.” He heard Nancy let out a small laugh.

Dustin nodded his assent, taking another bite and saying something not quite understandable while his mouth was still full. The kids glanced between each other for a moment before getting up and going to the kitchen to grab their own cookie. Billy and Will came back to the room about that time, Will laughing at something Billy had said. When Billy saw everyone eating the food he’d brought, his shoulders seemed to lose some of their tension.

Steve felt himself relax as well when the kids invited Billy to play a game with them. Steve beamed at Billy from across the room, who ducked his head, his cheeks going a bit red, and let himself be shepherded over to the circle everyone was forming around the board on the ground. Steve stayed in the background, picking up some of the mess they’d caused, catching Billy glancing over at him every so often.

Eventually, the kids grew tired of the game and scattered to find something new to play. Billy walked past Steve, holding a cigarette up in front of him with a raised eyebrow before going outside. Steve glanced over at Nancy and Jonathan to make sure they had everything handled before slipping out the front door, too.

It had grown dark outside, but Steve managed to catch sight of Billy before he disappeared around the side of the house. Steve followed, finding Billy leaning up against the wall, the unlit cigarette dangling from his fingers. When Billy saw him, he straightened up, putting the cigarette in his jacket pocket.

“I thought you were coming out here to smoke,” Steve said, standing in front of Billy.

"I may have used that as an excuse to get you alone," Billy replied, tapping his fingers on his hip.

"Oh, so you lied to me?" Steve said, putting on his best serious face but probably failing.

Billy made a small, amused noise. "I can't really lie to you if I never said anything in the first place."

Steve huffed out a laugh. He hesitated before reaching out and taking hold of the key around Billy's neck, feeling the warmth of Billy's skin against his. Billy grabbed Steve's hand, squeezing gently. He lifted Steve's hand to his lips and kissed Steve's knuckles softly.

Steve couldn't help but stare in fascination. Whenever he was with Billy, he felt both so grounded and so out of his element. It was finally dawning on him that he and Billy were really *together*.

Billy looked up at Steve, seeming startled by the look in Steve's eye. He dropped Steve's hand. "Is this... Do you not want me to do that?"

Steve leaned in and placed a chaste kiss on the corner of Billy's mouth. "I think I want you to do that more. But preferably here." He tapped his own lips.

Billy didn't falter, pulling Steve close to him and capturing Steve's lips with his own. Steve wrapped his arms around Billy, feeling lightheaded. He'd never been kissed like this before, not with this kind of fervor. It was like Billy had been waiting the entire week to kiss him again.

Billy's hands had slipped underneath Steve's shirt, his fingers roaming Steve's back, his nails leaving light scratches across Steve's skin. Steve shivered, overwhelmed by the sensation. He nearly jumped out of his own skin when someone cleared their throat next to him.

Steve and Billy broke apart quickly, stumbling away from each other. Then Steve saw Dustin, looking unconcerned, and wanted to fall to his knees in relief.

"First off," Dustin said, "I didn't need to see that PDA. My poor,

youthful eyes are burning now. Second, Nancy sent me to get you, Steve, because Mike jumped off the kitchen table and broke a chair. Also, I need you to give me a ride home after that's dealt with."

"Fine, fine," Steve said, trying to wave Dustin away. "Tell Nancy I'll be there in a second."

When Dustin was gone, Billy started to laugh. Steve glared at him.

"That wasn't funny," Steve said. "What if that hadn't been Dustin?"

"I know," Billy responded, still chuckling a bit. "I was so fucking scared. I think I may have peed a little bit."

Steve groaned, bending over and resting his hands on his knees. "God, me, too." He straightened up and grabbed the front of Billy's shirt, feeling courageous now that he had adrenaline pumping through him. "I should at least get to call you my boyfriend after that."

Billy's smile slipped from his face, turning his expression serious. He searched Steve's face briefly. "You mean it?"

Steve opened and closed his mouth, not expecting that reaction. He thought about it for a moment. He hadn't really considered how long he was supposed to wait before he and Billy were considered more than 'more than friends.' But Steve knew that it was something that he wanted. He just hadn't expected to be the one to bring it up.

"Yeah," Steve said. "I mean it."

Billy brushed Steve's hair away from his forehead and gave a little nod. "Okay," he said. "Steve Harrington, my boyfriend."

Steve could feel himself grinning like an idiot. "I like how that sounds. How does 'Billy Hargrove, boyfriend extraordinaire' sound?"

Billy let out a laugh. "That sounds super dorky."

"Good, that's your new nickname." Steve let go of Billy, still smiling. "Now, excuse me while I go deal with the train wreck inside."

Billy gave him a little push. "Try not to be overtaken by children."

Five minutes left. Steve stared up at the clock on the wall, watching the second hand tick down the remaining time left before school was let out for the summer. And, for him, let out for good. Hopefully. He just had to pass all his finals, and he'd be good.

Steve glanced down at his test once more. He'd gone back over it twice now, and he didn't think going over it a third time would make much of a difference. The past two weeks had been spent constantly studying, mainly with Billy. They'd gone to the library or to Steve's house- which was the place Steve preferred to study because he could spend his breaks messing around with Billy. His boyfriend. He still felt oddly giddy about that.

Steve knew that Billy had been accepted into multiple schools, but he hadn't told Steve which ones, saying that only his final choice mattered. Steve had heard back from the schools he'd applied to, and he'd even been accepted to a couple, but they hadn't been the greatest of schools.

The more Steve thought about it, the more he grew aware that maybe he was meant to stay in Hawkins. Hopper had even offered him a job with the police if Steve got through the training. He was even thinking of taking the offer.

The bell rang for class to end, and a few kids let out small whoops of joy. Steve packed up his stuff and turned his test in, feeling lighter now that it was all over. He ran into Billy in the hallway, and Billy held onto the strap of Steve's backpack as the crowd pushed them out the doors and into the sunshine.

Billy gave Steve's backpack a small tug. "Follow me," he said before trotting off in the direction of his car.

Steve followed after him at a leisurely pace. Billy was standing by the Camaro, looking happy, looking almost like a live wire. Steve didn't think he'd ever seen Billy like this.

“Are we waiting for Max, too?” Steve asked, running his fingers across the car’s hood.

Billy shook his head. “She’s getting a ride with Lucas’ mom to the Wheeler’s.”

“What’s got you so amped up?” Steve asked as he slid into the passenger seat. “Are you really that excited that school’s out?”

“I have good news,” Billy replied. “But I want to tell you about it somewhere private.” He started the car and backed out of his space, avoiding hitting the kids mulling about in the parking lot.

Steve settled back into his seat, not pushing Billy to tell him anything yet. Instead, he listened to the music from Billy’s stereo and tilted his face towards the sunlight streaming through the window, closing his eyes. He could hear Billy humming and drumming along to the music.

Steve hadn’t realized he’d dozed off until Billy was shaking him awake. Steve straightened up and rubbed at his eyes before taking in his surroundings. They were at the top of the cliff overlooking Hawkins.

Billy had turned off the car and gotten out, perching himself on the hood of the car. Steve got out, too, and sat next to Billy, taking a deep breath to clear his head. They hadn’t been up here since the night Billy had first kissed him.

Billy turned to Steve, their knees knocking together. “I got into a school in California, and I think I’m going to go.” His face was bright, but there was an edge of anxiety to his voice.

Steve felt he’d had the rug pulled right out from underneath him. He stammered for a bit before saying, “Billy, that’s great.”

Billy studied Steve’s face for a moment. “You’re taking this about as well as I imagined you would.”

“So, not so well, I take it.”

“This is a really good opportunity for me. And I’d be back in a place I

love at a decent school.” Billy paused, waiting for Steve to object.

Of course, Steve wanted nothing more than to keep Billy around. He had to admit to himself that he’d be heartbroken to be separated from Billy like that. But it wouldn’t be right for him to try to convince Billy to stay in Hawkins until Steve figured out what to do with his own life. Finally, he worked up the courage to speak.

“You should go,” Steve said firmly, though he felt weak. “Go, and know that I’ll be waiting for you if you ever decide to come back.”

Billy reached up and gripped the side of Steve’s neck, not tight enough to hurt. “You could come with me, Steve. You could go to a community college near me or find some work to do until you figure stuff out.”

Steve shook his head. “No. I belong in Hawkins. I’d be lying to myself if I didn’t admit that.”

Billy’s grip on Steve’s neck tightened for a second, then he dropped his hand. “At least think about it, okay?”

“Okay,” Steve replied, but he already had his mind made up. He stood up and placed a gentle kiss on Billy’s forehead. “You’re going to do some amazing things with your life. I can feel it.”

Billy scrubbed a hand across his face. “Shit, Harrington, you better not make me cry.”

“Seems like it’s a little too late for that.”

Billy swatted out at Steve, who dodged the attack. Billy stood up and caught Steve by the hips, a sad smile on his lips. “I fucking hate this,” he said. “But we’re not going to waste any time while I’m still here.”

Steve placed his hands on Billy’s chest. “No time with you is wasted.”

It was dark. Steve stared out the doors of the police station, tapping his pen on his desk as he gazed into the black night. He was almost finished with his paperwork, but his brain had decided to go on

vacation a long time ago. It didn't help that there wasn't anyone in the room with him to pressure him to look busy.

It had been a long day. If he'd known how many petty complaints he would have to deal with as a cop, he would have turned Hopper's job offer down when it'd first been brought up almost six years ago. Then again, Steve couldn't see himself in any other profession; it was tiring, but he enjoyed what he was doing. And he'd been able to move out of his parents' house, which was a freedom he didn't know he'd sorely needed.

Steve forced himself to turn his attention back to his paperwork. He finished up in record time, and put everything where it belonged before grabbing his jacket off his chair and heading outside. It was a nice night, and if Steve didn't live so far from the station, he would've walked home. Instead, he got in his car and drove slowly, his window rolled down to let in the fresh air.

The way home always took Steve past the house where Billy used to live. He still felt an ache when he passed by, though it wasn't as bad as it used to be. He'd never gone inside, even when Max had invited him over for dinner more than once. He'd always refused, saying he was busy, but he knew it was because he wouldn't be able to handle being there, being where Billy used to be. Steve felt silly at times, being so broken up about a boy he hadn't seen for years.

Steve and Billy had written to each other and talked over the phone the first few months after Billy had gone to California. But eventually, they'd stopped talking all together, and Billy had never come back on breaks to visit. Steve didn't hold it against him; Billy had wanted to get away from Hawkins ever since he'd first moved here.

Steve glanced out the window as the Hargrove house came into view, and he felt his heart stop for a moment as he spotted a familiar blue Camaro sitting in the driveway. Steve slammed on his brakes, then took a moment to just breathe before pulling into the driveway behind the car. He got out and stared at the Camaro for a long time.

It couldn't be. He had to be dreaming.

Steve pinched his arm, but nothing happened. He jumped when the

house's front door swung open and Max walked out, her red hair much shorter now than it'd a few days ago. She looked startled to see Steve standing there like an idiot.

"Steve?" She said, walking over to him. "Is everything alright? You never come here."

Steve belatedly realized that he was still in uniform, and Max probably thought he was on the job. "No, everything's fine," he said. "I just... saw the car."

Max followed Steve's gaze. "Oh, yeah. Billy's staying with us for a few days before he moves into his new place."

Steve gave her a questioning look.

"He got a job a little ways outside of Hawkins," Max elaborated. "It's at some pharmaceutical company that does a lot of research stuff." She paused as a car pulled up to the curb with Lucas at the wheel. "Do you want to go inside and see him? The door's unlocked if you do. Just let yourself in." She gave Steve's arm a little squeeze before heading over to Lucas' car.

Steve felt his feet carrying him to the house, his heart beating hard. He didn't know what he expected, if Billy would even still care about him anymore. But he needed to know, even if it hurt.

Steve went inside and called out, "Susan? It's Steve. Max said I could let myself in."

A few seconds later, Susan appeared in the room. "Hey, honey. How are you doing? It's so nice to see you. Billy's here if you'd like to sit down with us and talk. Oh, but maybe you're here for work?"

Steve shook his head. "No, I got off work ten minutes ago. I'd love to talk."

Susan smiled at him and waved him into the kitchen. "Billy, do you remember Steve Harrington?"

Steve stepped into the kitchen, and he felt like he was underwater. Billy was sitting at the kitchen counter nursing a cup of coffee. He'd

cut his hair short at some point, but he looked almost exactly the same now as he did when Steve had said goodbye to him. Though Billy had his shirt buttoned all the way up, Steve could see two thin chains hanging around his neck.

Billy stared openly at Steve for a second before saying, "Yes, I remember. Um, Susan, do you think I could talk to Steve alone for a moment?"

Susan hesitated before nodding. "I'll be my room if you need me."

Steve waited for the sound of her door closing before speaking. "It's good to see you again, Billy. Max says you got a job close by and you'll be moving back."

"Yeah, I'll be working in a lab while I try to get my PhD. It's-" Billy cut himself off and stood up, looking like he didn't know what to do with himself. "I guess you got through training, huh? How's it feel to be a cop?"

"Good. I'm glad I followed through with it."

Billy ran his tongue over his bottom lip. "Wow, this is super weird. I... When we stopped talking, I didn't know if I'd ever see you again. But seeing you now, it's like I'm in a dream or something."

Steve smiled a bit. "I feel the same way. I pinched myself when I saw your car outside."

Billy let out a little laugh, then regarded Steve with sentimental eyes. "God, I've missed you. I've thought about you so much over the years. You're kind of the reason why I choose to come back here." He paused. "Sorry, that probably sound really cheesy. And I bet you've probably got someone in your life, too, which makes me sound a little desperate."

"Actually, I haven't dated anyone since you left," Steve admitted. "Which makes me sound pretty lame."

"You *are* pretty but definitely not lame," Billy replied, giving Steve a grin. "I haven't really dated much, either. I think I kept comparing people to you, and I knew no one could ever truly stack up."

Steve finally moved from his spot, going to stand close to Billy. He grabbed the chains around Billy's neck and pulled the necklaces out. On one chain was the pendant Billy had been wearing since the day they'd met, and on the other was the key Steve had given him.

Billy took in a shaky breath. "Would it be crazy to ask you out to dinner? I don't even know if you still feel anything for me but-"

"I told you I'd wait for you, and I meant it," Steve interrupted before leaning in and kissing Billy. He'd been waiting years to be able to do it, and if the way Billy was kissing him back was any indication, he'd been doing his fair share of waiting, too. When they pulled apart, Billy looked dazed but happy.

Billy cleared his throat. "So, um, was that a yes?"

Steve grinned. "Yes. Always yes."

Author's Note:

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